For What I'm Not

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For What I'm Not

by Yserah

Summary

Till always said he wanted someone to protect, someone soft, someone delicate.

Ivan was none of those things. He was tall, powerful, and born an Alpha in a world where that meant everything... and nothing to the one he loved.

So he stayed silent. Watched Till fall for someone else. Watched him smile in ways he never did for him.

Loving from a distance was bearable, until Ivan discovered a way to change. A way to maybe become what Till wanted.

Even if it tore him apart.

—

Or
Ivan, a desperate Alpha, took a pill to turn himself into an Omega.

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Notes

Hii.. This is my first work. Kinda nervous, not gonna lie. I don't know what should I put or write. Oh! Sorry Ivan, I love you but you should suffer for your author's sake. I hope you'll love this fic as much as I do. Muah(இдஇ;)

English is not my first language.

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Thank you so much for waiting!! Yeyyy

Chapter 1: The One Who Stays

Ivan wasn't sure why he did this to himself.

It wasn't like this was new. The bitter taste of longing, the sharp sting of reality, he'd swallowed them for years, let them settle deep inside where no one could see. But no matter how much he tried to ignore it, no matter how many times he told himself he should move on, his eyes always found their way back to Till.

And Till, oblivious as ever, only had eyes for someone else.

From where he stood, hidden by the shade of a campus tree, Ivan watched as Till laughed, his teal eyes crinkling at the corners, cheeks slightly pink. The wind caught strands of his gray hair, tousling them messily as he leaned closer to Mizi, a short, energetic Omega with bright chartreuse eyes.

Ivan clenched his jaw.

It wasn't Till's fault. He was like this, warm in his own rough way, easy to admire, impossible to reach. The kind of person who smiled without realizing how much it could ruin someone.

He shouldn't be selfish.

But gods, he wanted to be.

I want you to have me… consume me. Fill me. I'm here, Till. His fingers curled into his palm, nails pressing into skin. *What should I do to make you mine?*

Mizi said something, and Till's laughter echoed across the courtyard. Ivan barely heard the words, too focused on the way Till's eyes softened, the way his lips curved with something that looked too much like adoration. It made his stomach twist.

"You're staring again," a voice interrupted his thoughts.

Ivan turned his head slightly, his expression smoothing into something neutral. Mizi's girlfriend, Sua, stood a few steps away, arms crossed. She was an Alpha like him, confident, sharp-eyed.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Ivan said smoothly, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Sua scoffed. "Right. And I suppose you're just admiring the scenery?"

Ivan let out a low chuckle, tilting his head. "I can appreciate a good view."

She wasn't amused. "You do this every time. You think no one notices, but you're always watching him."

Ivan said nothing.

Sua sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Look, I don't know

what your deal is, but if you're waiting for Till to suddenly turn around and see you, you're wasting your time."

He already knew that.

But knowing and accepting were two different things.

Life had always been boring.

People were boring.

Everything was predictable, a pre-written script that everyone followed without question. Wake up, go to school, listen to teachers who spoke in monotone voices about things that didn't matter. Come home to a house too big and too cold, filled with expensive things no one really cared about. His parents were always working, meetings, flights, business trips, whatever. His nannies changed every few months, rotating in and out like workers on a shift.

Nothing mattered.

Nothing stuck.

No one paid attention to him, not really. They only saw what they wanted to see.

"You're such a lucky boy, Ivan. Born into a great family. You have

everything you could ever want."

Did he?

Did he really?

Because most of the time, he felt like he was just floating, untethered, disconnected from everything.

Then—

He saw him.

It was an ordinary afternoon. School had ended, and the campus grounds were bathed in golden light. The air was thick with the scent of grass and warm earth, the sky a lazy shade of blue.

Ivan had wandered, as he always did, hands stuffed in his pockets, dragging his feet against the pavement, waiting for something, anything to happen.

And then, under the shade of a sprawling tree near the school gates, he spotted a boy.

Not just any boy.

A boy with grayish hair, slightly messy, strands falling into his sharp, teal-colored eyes. His posture was intense, hunched over a notebook, a

pencil gripped tightly in his hand as he furiously scribbled.

Ivan stopped.

Tilted his head.

He was close enough to see the way the boy's brows furrowed in concentration, the way his lips pressed together as if he were solving the most important problem in the world.

For the first time in a long while—

Ivan was interested.

So he walked over.

He wasn't particularly quiet about it, footsteps crunching against the grass as he approached. The boy didn't notice him at first, still too absorbed in whatever he was doing.

Ivan peered over his shoulder.

The notebook was filled with thick, dark strokes, something rounded, something with too many legs.

Ivan grinned.

“Is that a spider?”

The boy jerked, as if suddenly remembering he wasn’t alone. His head snapped up, teal eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“What?”

Ivan pointed at the drawing, his snaggletooth peeking through his grin.

“That thing. Is it a spider?”

The boy scowled. Deeply.

“No, dumbass.”

“Ohhh.” Ivan nodded sagely. “So an octopus, then.”

The way the boy’s face twisted in sheer, offended disbelief—

It was hilarious.

“No! It’s neither of those, you idiot!” He slammed his notebook shut and turned fully toward Ivan, eyes blazing. “Who even are you?!"

Ivan grinned wider.

“Ivan.” He plopped down next to him, completely uninvited. “And you?”

The boy crossed his arms, still glaring.

“Tsk. Till.”

“Till.” Ivan repeated it, testing the sound of it in his mouth.

He liked it.

”So, Till-” why did the name feel fun to say? “If it’s not a spider or an octopus, what is it?”

Till huffed, opening his notebook again, flipping to a fresh page. His pencil moved quickly, sketching out a clearer version of whatever he had been drawing before.

It was… a creature.

A strange one. Not quite an animal, not quite human. There were sharp lines, jagged shapes, a form that was unsettling yet fascinating.

“It’s a monster,” Till muttered, glancing at Ivan briefly, as if expecting him to mock him.

But Ivan just blinked.

Then—grinned.

“Cool.”

Till’s brows twitched. “Cool?”

“Yeah. Creepy, but cool.”

Till’s expression softened just slightly.

Then—

“Wait.” His eyes narrowed. “You’re not just saying that to mess with me, are you?”

Ivan held up his hands in mock innocence.

“What? Me? Never."

Till stared at him, as if trying to decide whether to believe him or punch him.

In the end, he just sighed. “Whatever.”

Ivan leaned back on his hands, glancing at the drawing again.

“You draw a lot?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to.” Till’s voice was matter of fact.

Ivan let out a short chuckle.

“That’s a good reason.”

Till squinted at him, as if he wasn’t expecting that response.

Ivan just smiled.

This was new.

This was different.

Oh.

Life wasn’t boring anymore.

Chapter 2: Being Seen

Chapter Summary

> Ivan kept stealing things. Kept staring too long. Kept lingering too close. He kept testing, poking, provoking. Because every reaction from Till. Every glare, every insult, every punch to the arm was proof that Ivan mattered.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first time Ivan fought Till, it wasn't even a real fight. Not at first. It was just another moment, another stupid interaction that spiraled into something raw and violent and unforgettable.

Ivan had been watching him again, leaning over his shoulder, staring too closely, invading his space like he always did. Till was drawing, as usual, teal eyes narrowed in concentration, pencil moving across the page with quick, decisive strokes. Ivan never really cared about what he was drawing. He just liked watching. Liked seeing the way Till's fingers moved, the way his lips pressed together when he was focused.

And he liked interrupting him.

"What are you drawing?"

"A monster."

"How boring."

No answer, this won't do.

“Why do you always draw monsters? Why not something cute?”

Till ignored him again. Ivan, restless, nudged his side.

Till flinched.

Ivan paused. Then did it again. Harder.

“What the hell—” Till snapped, jerking away.

“You’re ticklish.”

“I’m not—”

Ivan poked him again. And again.

Till shoved him, hard. “Stop it, asshole.”

Ivan just laughed. It wasn’t a normal laugh, it was one of those deep, breathless ones that made his stomach hurt. A real, genuine laugh that he barely even recognized as his own. And for some reason, that was what did it.

Till froze. His grip on his pencil tightened. The lead pressed too hard, breaking with a sharp snap. Ivan didn’t notice at first, he was still laughing, head tilted back, unguarded. But then he heard the exhale.

The sharp, frustrated sound of someone barely holding it together.

And then—

Till punched him.

A real punch. Not just some playful smack or a push. No, his fist cracked against Ivan's face, knuckles colliding hard against his cheekbone.

For a second, Ivan just sat there, stunned. It hurts. His head had snapped to the side from the force of it, the impact buzzing in his skull. He blinked.

Then, he laughed.

A breathless, exhilarated laugh that made something in Till's face twist with confusion.

And then Ivan punched him back.

It wasn't even a conscious decision. His fist just moved, slamming into Till's face, catching him square on the jaw. Till stumbled but caught himself fast. His eyes flashed, dark and sharp, and before Ivan could react—

Till lunged at him.

They crashed to the ground, rolling, grappling, fists swinging. It wasn't coordinated or clean, it was messy, chaotic, desperate. Ivan couldn't stop laughing, even when Till's fists connected, even when his lip split, even when his vision blurred for half a second from a particularly hard hit.

And the more he laughed, the angrier Till got.

"The fuck is so funny?!" Till growled, his knuckles cracking against Ivan's cheek.

"You—" Ivan gasped between breaths, shoving him off, still grinning. His snaggletooth peeked out, smeared with blood. "You punch like a girl."

Till let out a frustrated sound, a growl that didn't even sound human, and swung again. Ivan dodged, barely. His body ached, his face stung, but his head was light, buzzing, exhilarated. Till was looking at him. Till was fighting him. Till was paying attention.

And then, suddenly, it was over.

They were both on the ground, panting hard, bruised and battered. Till's eye was already swelling, darkening into what was definitely going to be a black eye. Ivan could feel blood trickling from his nose, the sharp metallic taste filling his mouth.

For a moment, neither of them spoke, just breathing hard, chests heaving.

Of course it was Ivan who ruined the moment.

“I won.”

Till’s head snapped toward him. “The fuck you don’t.” His voice was rough, breathless.

Ivan smiled, bruised and bloodied, his eyes sharp and wild. Something in them made Till pause, just for a second. Because that look, that fucking look wasn’t normal. It wasn’t just amusement. It wasn’t just satisfaction.

It was something unhinged.

Till swallowed hard, his pulse still racing. He turned his head away, exhaling sharply. “Psycho,” he muttered.

Ivan chuckled. “And you still fought me.”

Till didn’t respond. But he didn’t deny it, either.

Ivan wasn’t just some annoying kid anymore.

He was the boy Till fought with, the boy who wouldn’t leave him alone, the boy who laughed even when he was getting hit.

And if fighting got Till’s attention, then Ivan would fight him again and again and again.

But fighting wasn't the only way to make Till look at him.

Stealing worked, too.

A pencil. A notebook. An eraser Till always used. Ivan would take them and wait. And when Till noticed, when he turned, eyes sharp with frustration, demanding where his things went, that was Ivan's favorite part.

"You took it, didn't you?"

Ivan, playing innocent, shrugged.

"Why would I take your ugly eraser?"

"Because you're a thief."

"Am not."

"Are too."

Ivan would eventually "find" the missing item, handing it back like some grand hero recovering lost treasure. Till would roll his eyes. But, he never stopped talking to him. Never ignored him. And that was all Ivan wanted.

To be noticed.

To be seen.

To be needed.

Even if it meant being a little bit of a freak.

Till never really pushed him away. Well, he tried. He called Ivan an idiot, a thief, an asshole. He groaned whenever Ivan latched onto him like a parasite. But he never truly left.

And Ivan got used to it. The rhythm of their days, annoy Till, steal something, pretend to find it, repeat.

But then he started testing things.

Staring.

It wasn't subtle. He would just watch Till, eyes fixed, unmoving. Like he was memorizing something irreplaceable. It wasn't conscious at first, his body just gravitated toward him. But eventually, he did it on purpose.

Till noticed.

"Why the hell are you looking at me like that?" he snapped one day, shuddering like something had just crawled down his spine.

Ivan only grinned innocently.

Till scowled, rubbing his arms. “You’re creepy. Stop it.”

He didn’t.

And when staring wasn’t enough, he started following.

At first, it was unintentional, he just always happened to be where Till was. The courtyard, the cafeteria, the hallway outside his classroom. Then, it became deliberate.

He would trail behind Till, matching his pace without him noticing. Weaving through the library shelves, crouching low, peeking between the gaps, watching the way Till’s fingers skimmed book pages. Close enough to hear him breathe.

Once, he even followed him home. Not all the way, yet just far enough to see. To know where Till lived. To picture him in his space, in his room.

Till caught him eventually.

“Are you following me?” he asked, squinting suspiciously.

Ivan, without missing a beat, “What? No. I just happen to be going this way.”

“You live in the other direction.”

“Maybe I changed my route.”

Till groaned, rubbing his temples. “You’re so fucking weird.”

Till turned away, muttering under his breath. He didn’t push him away.

And that was all Ivan cared about.

Ivan had no sense of personal space. Never had, never would.

When he hugged Till for the first time, it wasn’t out of affection. It wasn’t even planned. It just happened.

They were eight, walking home from school, when a sudden chill cut through the air. Ivan, naturally, decided to solve this problem in the easiest way possible. By grabbing the warmest thing in sight.

Till.

Before the poor kid even realized what was happening, Ivan wrapped himself around him from behind, arms locking tight like a vice. Till reacted exactly as expected, with absolute outrage. He thrashed, elbowed, even tried to stomp on Ivan’s foot, but nothing worked. Ivan held on like his life depended on it, burying his cold nose against Till’s shoulder.

Warm. Soft. Kind of nice, actually.

Till was livid. He twisted, trying to pry Ivan off. It was useless. “Get off me!”

“No.”

“I swear to god, Ivan—”

“Just for a minute, please.”

“NO.”

Ivan hummed, tightening his grip. He could feel the way Till’s body tensed, coiled with resistance, on the verge of another outburst.

Then, suddenly, the fight drained out of him. It was subtle, the shift from stiff defiance to reluctant acceptance. A sigh, an exhale, the faintest drop of his shoulders. Till stopped struggling.

Ivan grinned against his neck. Victory.

That was all he needed to know.

From then on, he never stopped.

By the time they were ten, Ivan had developed a habit.

Till's hair.

It was soft. Silky. Silver-gray like the moon, catching the light in a way that made Ivan's fingers twitch with the urge to touch it. He started small, flicking the ends just to annoy him, ruffling it when Till was distracted, yanking on it when they wrestled.

Then, one day, he got bolder.

Till had fallen asleep in class again, head resting on folded arms, hair spilling across his desk like liquid metal. Ivan stared at it for a long time, fingers itching, before finally giving in.

Carefully—so, so carefully, he reached out and began braiding it.

It wasn't perfect. One side was looser than the other, and some strands stuck out at odd angles, but Ivan was proud of his work. He was almost done when Till suddenly stirred.

A slow blink. A shift.

Then, without warning, his head shot up.

Ivan barely yanked his hands back in time. Wide teal eyes flicked to the half-finished braid, then to Ivan's guilty expression. A pause. A

slow, creeping realization.

Then, chaos.

Till lunged, knocking over his own chair in the process. Ivan dodged, barely avoiding getting tackled to the ground.

“It was a compliment!” he yelped, scrambling back. “You have really braidable hair!”

Till did not take this as a compliment.

A chase ensued, desks scraping, students scattering, Till’s furious shouts filling the room. When he finally caught Ivan, he grabbed a fistful of his hair and yanked, hard.

Ivan howled, half in pain, half in laughter.

That was the scene their teacher walked in on.

Both of them got detention.

Ivan still thought it was worth it.

Hands were just hands. Nothing special. Nothing worth noticing.

At least, that's what Ivan used to think, until Till's.

It wasn't just one thing that made him start paying attention. Maybe it was the way Till held his pencil, grip firm but relaxed, as if sketching was an extension of his body. Or the ink stains that never seemed to fade from his fingers, proof that his hands were always moving, always creating.

Or maybe it was the way he fought. How his knuckles cracked against Ivan's cheek like he had been throwing punches his whole life. Quick. Strong. Sure.

But if he was being honest, it started even earlier than that.

Some childhood game. Some dumb trick where you had to pull away before getting trapped. Ivan had been terrible at it, too slow, too distracted. Till, on the other hand, was too fast, dodging, twisting, then, snap. His fingers closed around Ivan's wrist, warm and firm, pressing against his pulse for just a second before letting go.

Till smirked, victorious.

Ivan sat there, staring at his own hand, flexing his fingers like he could still feel it.

And after that, he started noticing things.

The way Till fidgeted when deep in thought, fingers tapping against his thigh in an absent rhythm. The way his hands moved when he

played guitar, strumming with quiet precision. Or how, whenever Ivan stole something from him, Till never grabbed the object back. He always grabbed Ivan's wrist instead.

And suddenly, being caught didn't seem so bad.

So he started stealing things more often.

Pens, notebooks, hair ties, anything Till would bother chasing him for. And when those fingers wrapped around his wrist, Ivan never pulled away.

He didn't just test boundaries. He obliterated them.

The first time he sat in Till's lap, it was a complete accident.

Sort of.

The rain had trapped them outside after school, and the only place to sit was the damp, grimy steps. Till, unwilling to ruin his uniform, had settled into a crouch, sketchbook balanced on his knee, lost in his own world.

And Ivan, naturally, took this as an invitation.

With absolutely no hesitation, he plopped himself directly onto Till's legs.

The reaction was immediate. “Get off.”

“Nuh-uh.”

Till groaned, already done with this. “You’re heavy, you fat bastard.”

“I am perfectly proportioned.”

“Get. Off.”

Ivan wiggled, making himself comfortable. “Nah. I live here now.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“And yet, here I remain.”

Till exhaled sharply through his nose, like he was debating whether shoving Ivan off was worth the effort. Instead of fighting, he sighed, leaned back against the step, and—to Ivan’s absolute delight, propped his phone against Ivan’s shoulder to watch a video.

That was unexpected.

Ivan tilted his head, grinning. “Wow. You’re just gonna use me like a piece of furniture?”

“You’re the one who sat there.”

“True. But still.”

Till ignored him.

Ivan, again, victorious, stayed exactly where he was.

And that was how he learned a very important lesson: If he was persistent enough, Till would let him get away with anything.

So he did it again. And again.

Until eventually, Till just stopped telling him to move.

And just like that, it became part of their routine.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is longer than I anticipated.

Chapter 3: God was Never Kind

Chapter Summary

> Not because he didn't have something to say, but because every word felt like a lie he couldn't swallow this time. Because no matter how much he wanted to speak, his throat was tight and his tongue was heavy with everything he could never say.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The moment Ivan realized it wasn't just childish attachment, he was fifteen.

It didn't hit him all at once. There was no grand revelation, no lightning strike of awareness. It was slow, insidious. Creeping beneath his skin like fire, like something inevitable.

Till had been laughing.

Not just a chuckle. Not the half-annoyed, half-amused scoffs he usually threw Ivan's way. But a real, full-bodied laugh. Bright, uninhibited, the kind that made his whole face light up. Maybe it was a dumb joke, maybe it was one of Ivan's usual antics, but whatever it was didn't matter.

What mattered was that Till was laughing, and Ivan was watching.

And suddenly, it hurt to breathe.

His chest was tight, his throat was raw, his pulse a dull, unsteady thing pounding in his ears. It was overwhelming, suffocating, a

sensation he had no name for.

It was hunger and fear and yearning all at once.

He wanted to touch him.

Not like before. Not a shove, not a playful yank on his hair, not a punch to the arm just to see him glare. He wanted to reach out and hold. Keep. Curl his fingers around Till's wrist and never let go.

His hands twitched.

He clenched them into fists.

He didn't understand it, not fully, not yet—but the weight of it was enough to make his stomach twist. Enough to make him dizzy with something close to dread.

That was the first time Ivan thought: *I'm in trouble.*

The first time he knew, really, truly knew that Till wasn't just Till anymore.

He was something dangerous. Something Ivan would ruin himself for.

And he did.

Because once Ivan realized, there was no going back.

Ivan wasn't the kind of person who longed for things.

Or at least, he didn't think he was.

He had everything he could ever want. Comfort, privilege, parents who gave him anything as long as he played the perfect son. He was never denied things. Never told no. And yet, none of it mattered.

Nothing ever felt like it mattered.

Until Till.

A glance. A laugh. A fist colliding with his shoulder, playful but firm. The heat of another person's presence, solid and unmovable.

Ivan had grown up knowing how to manipulate attention, how to draw people in when he wanted. But Till was different. Till was difficult. Till didn't bend, didn't yield, didn't give him what he wanted without a fight.

And that was the moment something inside Ivan shifted.

The moment Till became the only thing that felt matters.

The moment he started to want.

It was different from anything else he had ever known.

It was in the way he looked at Till.

The way his eyes would find him in a crowd without even meaning to. The way the world seemed to blur when Till was near, as if nothing else existed.

The way he could map out the curve of his sharp, annoyed frown. The way he memorized every flick of his wrist when he sketched, every tilt of his head when he was thinking. The way his silver hair fell into his face when he wasn't paying attention, or the way his teal eyes would soften when he was lost in thought.

It was *unfair*, how *effortless* it was.

How *unconscious*.

How *natural* it felt to reach for him.

Because Ivan did reach for him. Always.

With words, with teasing, with the childish games of stealing Till's things just to have a reason to return them. He reached for him in the way his body gravitated toward his warmth, the way his fingers twitched with the urge to touch, the way his heart stumbled every time Till turned to look at him.

He never knew what to call it.

Obsession? Maybe.

But that felt wrong, too small for what this was.

Because it wasn't just about having Till's attention. It wasn't about possession, about claiming something as his own.

It was about Till himself.

Till, who made the dull haze of his life crack open, made the static clear, made something shift in his chest that he didn't know how to undo.

Till, who could shove him away, call him an idiot, glare at him like he wanted to kill him, and Ivan would still come back, still laugh, still want.

Because even when Till was angry, even when he was frustrated, even when he rolled his eyes and muttered asshole under his breath, he was still there.

And Ivan had never had something that stayed before.

So he reached.

Again and again and again.

Because what else was he supposed to do?

The way Till felt to him wasn't something he could ignore. It wasn't something he could shake off. It wasn't something he could stop.

It was like breathing.

Like instinct.

Like something embedded so deeply into him that there was no way to unmake it.

And that was terrifying.

Because Ivan knew.

He knew.

This wasn't just some passing attachment. It wasn't just some childhood phase.

It was real.

And it wasn't going to go away.

No matter how much he wanted it to.

It was one of those lazy afternoons, where the sun dipped lower in the sky, stretching golden light over the world, casting long, drowsy shadows. The kind of day that made everything feel slow, like the world itself had exhaled and decided to rest.

Ivan and Till were lying on their backs in the grass, the scent of crushed leaves and sun-warmed earth filling the air. Till had his arms folded behind his head, staring up at the sky, and Ivan—well.

Ivan was staring at Till.

Not obviously. Just little glances. Just the occasional flick of his eyes toward the way Till's silver hair gleamed under the sunlight, the way his sharp teal eyes softened when he got lost in thought.

Till always looked different when he wasn't annoyed.

Quieter.

Almost peaceful.

And then, out of nowhere, Till spoke.

"If you could choose," he mused, voice light with curiosity, "what would you wanna be?"

Ivan blinked, dragged out of his daze. "Huh?"

"Your second gender," Till clarified, rolling his head to look at him. "If you could pick one, what would it be?"

Ivan froze.

The question shouldn't have meant anything. It was a stupid question. A childish one. It wasn't like they could actually choose. They'd find out when their bodies decided, when nature made the call for them.

And Ivan already knew what he would be.

Alpha.

It was inevitable. His entire bloodline was filled with them. There had never been an exception, not even once. He was born into it, bound to it. No room for chance, no possibility of anything else.

And he hated that.

Because for one brief, foolish second, he imagined a different answer.

Something impossible.

Something that would let him be small instead of big, soft instead of strong, something that would make it so that when Till said I want to protect someone—

He would look at him.

But Ivan swallowed all of that down, forced a smirk onto his face. "Dunno. Never thought about it."

Till huffed. "Lame."

And then, before Ivan could deflect, before he could steer the conversation away—

Till grinned.

Bright. Unapologetic. Unaware of the sudden weight pressing down on Ivan’s ribs.

"Me, though," he said excitedly. "I wanna be a Beta. Or an Alpha."

Ivan felt his breath stall. "Why?"

"’Cause then I’d be strong," Till said easily, stretching his arms above his head. "I’d be able to protect someone. Y’know, someone smaller than me. Someone I could fit in my arms."

Ivan's stomach twisted.

There was nothing wrong with what Till said. Nothing wrong with the way he said it, so full of confidence, so sure of himself. But something about it, something about the certainty, the finality made Ivan's throat go dry.

Because it confirmed something he had always known, deep down.

Till wanted an Omega.

Till wanted someone small.

Till wanted to protect.

And Ivan.. Ivan, with his future set in stone, with his broad shoulders and big hands, with his body that was meant to grow strong, to grow dominant, to become everything Till would never want—

Would *never* be that.

Never *could* be that.

A sharp, ugly thing clawed at his chest, something bitter, something that felt too close to loss for it to make any sense.

He forced himself to scoff, to play it off, to bury the sinking feeling beneath an easy, practiced smirk.

"Think you'd be any good at protecting someone?" he teased, bumping Till's shoulder with his own. "You cry over horror movies, dude."

Till turned red immediately. "I DO NOT."

"You literally refused to pee alone after we watched that one ghost movie—"

"THAT WAS DIFFERENT, YOU ASSHOLE—"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say, macho man—"

Till tackled him.

They rolled through the grass, shoving, laughing, Ivan letting himself get pushed down, letting Till win just to see that spark of victory in his eyes. Letting the moment distract him.

Letting himself pretend, just for a little longer, that the words Till had said didn't matter.

That they hadn't lodged deep inside him like a splinter.

That they wouldn't keep festering.

Of course, God is not kind.

Not to him.

Not to Ivan, who had spent years pretending that the inevitable would never come, that there was still some sliver of a chance, no matter how small, no matter how impossible. That fate might bend for him, just this once.

But fate didn't bend. It never did.

So when the results finally came, stamped in ink, sealed in certainty—

Till was a Beta.

And Ivan was an Alpha.

It should have been a relief. That's what everyone said. His parents were proud. His teachers congratulated him. His classmates clapped him on the back, already talking about how strong he would be, how lucky he was to be born with a future that people envied.

And Till—

Till was happy.

Because of course he was.

Ivan still remembers the way his face lit up when he read the paper, the way his sharp teal eyes softened with satisfaction. He had wanted this. He had hoped for this. Because Till, unlike Ivan, had dreamed of becoming something strong.

"To protect someone," he had said. Someone smaller, someone I can fit in my arms.

And now he could.

Now, it was set in stone.

Now, Ivan knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that he was wrong.

Because he had been holding onto something selfish, something ugly, something that shouldn't have even existed in the first place. A dream that wasn't meant for him. A wish he had no right to make.

He had wanted—God, he had wanted—

To be someone else.

To be someone Till could choose.

But he wasn't.

And now, he never would be.

The realization sat heavy in his chest, pressing down on his ribs, filling his lungs with something thick and suffocating. He couldn't speak, couldn't breathe, couldn't move. He just stood there, staring at his own results, staring at the word Alpha like it was some kind of death sentence.

And maybe, in a way, it was.

Because Ivan knew now, *really knew*. That the future he had hoped for, the one where Till would look at him the way he had always dreamed —

It was never going to happen.

Something inside him cracked.

He should have been used to this. The ache. The quiet devastation of knowing he would never be what Till wanted.

But this was different.

This was a line carved into stone, an answer he couldn't outrun, a truth he could never change.

Ivan forced himself to look up, forced himself to meet Till's gaze.

And Till was looking at him.

Not with sadness. Not with pity. Just curiosity, his head tilted slightly, eyes scanning Ivan's face like he was trying to figure something out.

Because of course Till noticed.

Of course he always noticed.

So Ivan did what he always did.

He smiled.

Flashed his teeth, sharp and easy, let the snaggletooth show, let it curve just enough to look real. The same smile he had practiced a thousand times in the mirror, the same smile he had learned to wear like armor.

And it worked.

Till's shoulders relaxed. The curiosity faded.

Because why wouldn't it?

Ivan was an Alpha. He was fine. There was no reason for him not to be fine.

So he let Till turn away. Let him laugh at something their classmates said, let the conversation shift to something else, let himself fade into the background of Till's world.

And Ivan stood there.

Still.

Silent.

Breathing, but not really alive.

Because no one told him—

No one warned him—

That grief could exist for things you never even had.

Chapter End Notes

Angstt.. Ehem, thank you so much for the comments! I'm so glad you liked it.

Chapter 4: His Muse

Chapter Summary

> There was something cruel about it, this quiet moment between the artist and his muse. Cruel not because Till was doing anything wrong, but because he was doing everything right… for someone else.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was something wrong with his body.

Ivan knew it the moment he woke up one morning and felt the stretch of his limbs, the way his bones ached, not with pain, but with something deeper, something inevitable. It was as if his skin no longer fit, as if his muscles were shifting beneath it, rearranging themselves without his permission.

He tried to ignore it at first. Brushed it off as a growth spurt, as exhaustion, as something he could sleep off. But it never went away. It only got worse.

The first real sign was his voice.

One day, he opened his mouth to speak, and the sound that came out wasn't his own. It was deeper, rougher. Something that belonged to someone else, someone older, someone heavier. He cleared his throat, tried again, but the change was permanent. He caught himself flinching the first time he heard it echo back at him.

Then came the shift in his reflection.

He avoided mirrors for as long as he could, but he couldn't avoid the way his shirts stretched across his chest, the way his sleeves hugged his arms too tightly. His shoulders had broadened, his height had surged, where once he could stand eye to eye with Till, now he towered over him. His body, once lean, had thickened, muscle wrapping around bone, turning him into something that took up more space than he ever wanted.

It wasn't just the physical changes. It was the way people looked at him.

It started subtly, longer glances, eyes lingering when he passed by. Girls who used to ignore him suddenly giggled behind their hands when they saw him. Omegas instinctively tilted their heads, baring their throats without realizing. People, strangers, classmates, even teachers began treating him with deference, their voices shifting when they spoke to him, their gazes flickering with something close to respect.

He was used to attention. He had always drawn eyes. But this was different.

This wasn't about him.

This was about what he was.

An Alpha.

A dominant one.

His body had *betrayed* him.

He hated it.

He hated the way people suddenly found him appealing, as if he hadn't been the same person all along. He hated the way his strength had multiplied, how easy it was to move, to take, to hurt. He hated the way his own presence felt suffocating, how he couldn't shrink himself down, couldn't make himself smaller, couldn't return to the shape he had been before.

But what he hated the most, what made something inside him rot, was Till's reaction.

Because Till noticed.

Not like the others did. Not with admiration, not with curiosity, not with attraction.

No, Till looked at him, really looked at him, and there was something there. Something unreadable, something searching. A flicker of hesitation, of realization, like he was recognizing someone he used to know and finding them unfamiliar.

Then he smiled, lips curving in a way that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I still remember how you used to be shorter than me."

Ivan *felt* it like a knife.

Not the words themselves, but the meaning behind them.

Till was remembering before.

Before Ivan became something bigger. Before he had to tilt his head to meet his eyes. Before everything changed.

And Ivan, he could barely breathe past it.

But he did what he always did. He grinned.

Flashed his snaggletooth like it didn’t hurt, like it didn’t kill him.

"Jealous?"

Till rolled his eyes, annoyance filled his face and shoved Ivan’s shoulder, laughed like it was nothing.

Like it wasn’t proof that Ivan would never be what he wanted.

Ivan let himself sway with the push, exaggerated it like it had any effect on him. Like he wasn’t built like a goddamn fortress. Like he wasn’t becoming something Till could never see as his.

He laughed because it was easy. Because it was safer. Because if he let himself stop, if he let himself feel, he wasn’t sure he could survive it.

The Angel

It happened so easily. So effortlessly.

One second, Till was beside him, ranting about something, probably about a class he hated or some professor that annoyed him. The next, he stopped talking mid-sentence.

Ivan barely had time to react before he noticed it.

Till wasn't just quiet. He was staring.

Ivan followed his gaze.

And then he saw her.

An Omega with soft pink hair, cascading down in effortless waves, and eyes so bright they looked like sunlight caught in glass, chartreuse, gleaming, alive. Her presence was undeniable, the kind that pulled people in without even trying.

She was smiling, a radiant, breathtaking thing that filled the air around her with warmth. It was the kind of smile that made people want to lean in, to be noticed by her. The kind that made her look untouchable yet impossibly close, an angel that had somehow stepped into their world.

And Till—Till, who never lost his words, who was always quick to snap back, was frozen.

Ivan's stomach twisted.

Till's lips parted slightly, his teal eyes wide in something close to awe. His fingers twitched at his side, like he wanted to reach out but knew better.

For a long, stretched moment, he didn't say anything.

Ivan clenched his jaw. His fingers curled into a fist inside his jacket pocket. He forced himself to speak. "Who's that?"

His voice was too rough, too sharp.

Till didn't even glance at him. "Who?"

Who? Ivan wanted to laugh. As if Till didn't know exactly who he was looking at.

"Mizi," Ivan said, the name bitter on his tongue. "Second-year. Omega. She's popular."

He knew everything about her, but he didn't need to say it. Till wasn't even listening. His eyes were still locked on her, like she was the only thing in the world.

And then it happened.

Till smiled.

Not his usual annoyed smirk. Not the sarcastic grin he threw at Ivan when they bickered. Not the sharp, teasing one he gave to the world.

This smile was real.

It reached his eyes.

Ivan's chest clenched so painfully he almost exhaled out of reflex, trying to ease the suffocating weight pressing against his ribs.

He had wanted to see that smile for years.

But it wasn't for him.

It was hers.

Till let out a quiet, nervous laugh, rubbing the back of his neck. Nervous. When had Till ever been nervous?

"I—I think I've seen her before," Till mumbled, almost as if he were talking to himself.

Ivan swallowed down the nausea crawling up his throat. “Yeah. She’s around.”

Till glanced at him for the first time in minutes, and Ivan saw it then, the slight pink creeping onto his ears, the way he shifted his weight like he was trying to brush off the emotions tightening in his chest.

Till was flustered. Flustered.

It hit Ivan like a blow to the stomach.

He had never seen Till like this before. Never seen him hesitate, never seen him struggle to find his words. Never seen him look at someone like that.

Like *they* were special.

Ivan had spent years watching Till, memorizing his every expression, his every habit. He knew the way Till laughed when he was genuinely amused versus when he was just messing with someone. He knew the way his teal eyes sharpened when he was focused, the way his lips quirked up when he was about to say something sarcastic. He knew the way Till’s body felt when they wrestled, the way his breath hitched when he got caught off guard.

But this?

This was different.

Till had never looked at him like that.

Never.

And now Ivan was forced to watch as Till found someone he wanted to protect.

Someone he wanted to belong to.

It wasn't him.

Ivan looked away, staring at the ground as a bitter laugh threatened to escape his throat. He shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, nails digging into his palms.

Of course, it wasn't him.

It was never going to be him.

There was something intimate about watching an artist work.

The way their hands moved without hesitation, the way they poured themselves onto a blank page, unaware of the world around them. It was a kind of devotion, one that most people wouldn't notice unless they were paying attention.

Ivan was always paying attention.

He leaned back in his seat, pretending to scroll through his phone, but his eyes never left the sketchbook on the table. Till's fingers twitched slightly as he worked, moving with a steady rhythm, completely absorbed in whatever he was creating.

Ivan already knew.

He didn't need to see the drawing to know who it was. He had memorized that face just as much as Till had.

Mizi.

Of course it was her.

Ivan exhaled quietly, taking a slow sip of his coffee, letting the bitterness settle on his tongue.

Till's focus was unwavering, his pencil dragging across the page in soft, sure strokes. He barely blinked. He barely moved. It was like his entire world had narrowed down to the lines he was bringing to life.

Ivan wanted to look away.

But he couldn't.

Instead, he watched, silent, unmoving, as Till reached up with his

thumb and smudged a section of the sketch, softening the shadows around Mizi's eyes. The gesture was almost tender.

Something in Ivan's chest twisted.

He hated this.

Hated the way it made his stomach feel tight, the way it made his skin feel too hot, like his own body was betraying him.

"You gonna frame that and hang it above your bed?" he muttered, keeping his tone light.

Till didn't even glance up. "Shut up."

Ivan smirked, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"You've been drawing a lot lately," he continued, tapping his fingers against the side of his coffee cup.

Till hummed in response, barely listening. "I guess."

Ivan tilted his head, watching him carefully. "Any particular reason?"

This time, Till paused. He twirled his pencil between his fingers, considering, before shrugging. "Dunno. She's just… easy to draw."

Easy.

The word echoed in Ivan's head, sharp and unforgiving.

Till finally looked at him then, his expression relaxed, unguarded. "She's got one of those faces, you know? And you just want to capture it." His gaze flickered back to the sketch. "I don't even have to think about it. My hand just moves on its own."

Ivan's grip tightened around his cup.

His hand just moves on its own.

There was a strange sort of finality in those words, like something being carved into stone.

Ivan could still remember the first time Till had ever drawn him. How he had complained the whole time, grumbling about how annoying it was, how Ivan wouldn't sit still, how he wasn't interesting enough to be a subject.

But he had done it.

And Ivan had wanted him to.

Had wanted Till's hands to move without thinking. Had wanted to be the kind of person that was effortless to capture. Had wanted to exist in Till's world in that way, imprinted on pages the same way Mizi was now.

But that had never happened.

Not like this.

Till's sketches of Ivan had always been forced, done out of obligation, out of persistence. He had never drawn Ivan the way he was drawing her.

With fascination.

With admiration.

With longing.

Ivan breathed out slowly, forcing his shoulders to relax. "Sounds like you've got it bad," he muttered.

Till huffed a quiet laugh, shaking his head. "You're so annoying."

Ivan smirked, tilting his chair back slightly. "It's a talent."

Till flicked his pencil at him, rolling his eyes before turning his attention back to the drawing.

Just like that, Ivan was forgotten.

The moment passed, the conversation moved on, and Till returned to his world, a world where his hands moved on their own.

A world where Ivan didn't exist the way he wanted to.

He turned his gaze away from the sketchbook, letting his eyes drift to the window, watching the blurred shapes of people passing by outside.

Mizi *wasn't* the one who had stolen Till's heart.

Till had *given* it away.

And Ivan had *never* even been considered.

Chapter End Notes

... This might be my favorite chapter. *scratches head*

Chapter 5: Run

Chapter Summary

> Ivan had always known how to wait in silence, hiding his emotions, but watching Till fall for someone else slowly broke him, leading him to accept an Omega he didn't love in a desperate attempt to move on.

Chapter Notes

> ⚠️⚠️ This chapter has Attempted Sexual Assault. Please read at your own risk. ⚠️⚠️

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ivan had always been good at waiting.

Since childhood, he had learned how to sit with his emotions, how to tuck them away in the quiet corners of his mind and pretend they didn't exist. It was a skill, a necessity—because feeling too much, wanting too much, had always led to nothing.

But this time, waiting felt different.

Because this time, Till wasn't looking at him.

It was small things at first.

The way Till's attention drifted when they talked, his eyes unconsciously searching for something else, someone else. The way his hands fidgeted more, smoothing over the fabric of his sleeves, adjusting his hair, restless in a way Ivan had never seen before. The way his usual, unbothered confidence seemed to waver whenever she was around.

Till was always aware of Mizi now. Even when he wasn't talking to her, he was thinking about her.

Ivan could see it in the way he lingered just a second too long outside the art room when Mizi was inside, in the way his gaze flickered to her even when they were across campus.

He was too shy to approach, but that didn't matter.

Because his attention was already hers.

Ivan wanted to be okay with it.

He told himself it didn't hurt.

But then one day, without thinking, without planning, he made a mistake.

Maybe it was out of desperation. Maybe it was self-destruction. Maybe it was just exhaustion, tired of waiting, tired of watching, tired of hoping for something that was never meant to be his.

Whatever it was, he let it happen.

He let someone else take up the space Till left behind.

The girl wasn't special to him. She wasn't anyone important, not really. But she was an Omega, and she liked him, and that should have been enough.

For a normal Alpha, it would have been enough.

So he played the part.

He let her hold his hand, let her cling to his arm, let her lean into him like it was natural, like it was right. He let people see them together. Let them whisper. Let them congratulate him like he was finally stepping into the role everyone expected him to play.

And then, Till found out.

It wasn't dramatic. There was no grand reveal, no sudden confrontation.

Just a quiet moment in the middle of an ordinary day.

Ivan had been standing near the courtyard, his new girlfriend pressed against his side, laughing at something he wasn't even listening to. And then, across the way, he saw him.

Till.

Standing there, looking at him.

Their eyes met, and for the first time in his life, Ivan didn't know what Till was thinking.

There was something in his expression that didn't make sense. A flicker of something unreadable, something Ivan wanted to understand but couldn't.

Then, just like that, Till smiled.

A small, easy smile.

And he walked up to them.

Ivan felt his entire body tense.

He didn't want to hear it.

Didn't want Till to say the words.

But he did.

"Congrats," Till said lightly, his voice steady, his eyes unwavering.

And that was it.

Simple. Effortless. No hesitation, no questioning, no doubt.

Just an easy congratulations, like it meant nothing

Like Ivan meant nothing.

The Omega beside him beamed, gripping his arm a little tighter, completely unaware of the way Ivan's stomach was twisting into knots.

He should have said something back. Should have laughed, teased, played along like he always did.

But he couldn't.

Because in that moment, something inside him cracked.

He had wanted something else.

Not congratulations.

Not approval.

He had wanted Till to stop him.

To tell him it was a mistake. To grab his wrist and pull him back. To do anything except stand there and accept it like this was how it was always meant to be.

Because it wasn't.

It wasn't.

But Till didn't stop him.

Till just smiled.

And Ivan had to accept that maybe.. maybe.. he wasn't worth stopping after all.

The bar was dimly lit, buzzing with low conversations and the occasional burst of laughter. A steady hum of music played in the background, the bass vibrating under Ivan's fingertips as he traced the rim of his glass.

He wasn't drunk. Not yet, at least.

The Omega sitting across from him leaned in closer, her elbow resting on the table, a playful smirk tugging at her lips. "You're surprisingly quiet tonight," she mused, swirling the drink in her hand.

Ivan blinked at her, his expression unreadable. "Am I?"

“You are.” She tilted her head, studying him with sharp, assessing eyes. “You’re always so laid back, but this feels different. You didn't want to be here, are you?”

He huffed a short laugh, masking the vague discomfort pressing against his ribs. “If I didn’t want to be here, I wouldn’t be.”

A lie.

He was here, wasn’t he? And yet, it didn’t feel like he was. The dim lighting, the heat of bodies pressed into booths and bar stools, the lingering scent of alcohol and pheromones in the air, it all felt distant. Muffled. Like he was watching himself from the outside, detached from the moment.

The Omega giggled, tapping her nails against her glass. “Fair enough. Still, you don’t strike me as the type to go drinking with a girl you barely know.”

“I know you,” Ivan countered lazily, lifting his drink to his lips.

She raised a brow. “Do you?”

No. He didn’t. Not really.

She was just an Omega who had confessed to him, someone he had no real reason to accept, yet he had. Maybe out of obligation. Maybe because he wanted to prove something to himself. Maybe because Till never looked at him the way he wanted.

Whatever the reason, here they were.

She gave a teasing hum, leaning in just a fraction more. “Well, let’s fix that, then.”

Ivan tilted his head. “Fix what?”

“You not knowing me.”

She smiled, reaching for his drink. “Let’s make a deal. I’ll tell you something about myself, and in return, you tell me something about you.”

Ivan exhaled through his nose, watching as she picked up his glass, swirling the contents absently before pushing it back toward him.

He didn’t respond.

The Omega’s gaze lingered, playful yet expectant. “I’ll start,” she said, pressing a finger to her lips as if in thought. “Let’s see… I love the rain.”

Ivan blinked. “…The rain?”

She grinned. “Yeah. Something about it is just comforting, you know? The sound, the smell… it makes the world feel softer.”

He studied her for a moment, then shrugged. “Not bad.”

She tapped the table. “Your turn.”

Ivan sighed, leaning back against the booth. He wasn’t in the mood for games, but he figured humoring her would be easier than pushing back.

“I hate strawberries,” he muttered, taking a sip of his drink.

The Omega gasped in mock horror. “You hate them?”

“Taste weird,” he replied simply. “Too sweet. And the texture is—” He made a vague motion with his hand, grimacing.

She giggled. “You’re the first Alpha I’ve met who doesn’t like them. Most of you go crazy over anything sweet.”

Ivan arched a brow. “Maybe I’m not like most Alphas.”

Her gaze flickered, something unreadable passing through her expression. Then, she reached for her own drink, smiling. “Guess I’ll have to find out for myself."

Ivan hummed, glancing at his glass. The ice had begun to melt, the condensation trailing down the sides. His fingers curled around it, the coolness grounding him for just a moment before he took another sip.

The Omega watched him closely.

Her smile never wavered.

Ivan had never felt so wrong in his own skin.

The air was thick, suffocating, heavy with the cloying scent of an Omega that wasn’t meant for him. It clung to him like a second skin, filling his lungs, pressing into every inch of his body like it was trying to reshape him into something else.

Something that fit.

Something that wasn’t him.

His hands were trembling.

He barely noticed at first. His mind was too fogged, too disoriented, too wrong to register anything beyond the slow, creeping terror rising in his chest. It wasn't supposed to be like this. This was supposed to be normal. This was what Alphas did. They were supposed to take in an Omega’s scent, accept it, crave it.

But his body, his instincts rejected it like poison.

His stomach twisted violently, nausea curling in his gut. His muscles locked up, skin crawling as though it wasn’t his own.

The Omega was still speaking, her voice soft, coaxing, but he couldn’t

hear the words. The sound was distant, warped, drowned out by the sharp ringing in his ears.

She was close. Too close.

A delicate hand pressed against his chest, trailing down, fingertips brushing against the hem of his shirt.

“Ivan,” she whispered, her scent thickening, wrapping around him like a vice. “Don’t be shy.”

He flinched.

It was automatic, instinctual. His body pulling away before he even realized he had moved. But the Omega didn’t stop.

She only smiled and reached out for him again.

Ivan’s breath hitched as she tugged lightly at his shirt, fingers curling around the fabric, pulling.

Something inside him snapped.

He shoved her away.

Hard.

The Omega stumbled back with a surprised gasp, but Ivan barely noticed. He was already moving, his hands clawing at his own skin, trying to wipe away her scent, trying to breathe, trying to get out.

His chest was heaving. His body was screaming.

The scent. The scent. The scent.

It was in his mouth, in his lungs, in his head.

It was suffocating him.

He needed to leave.

Now.

Ivan didn't remember how he got his clothes on.

His body moved on instinct, mind screaming at him to leave, to get away, to run. His fingers fumbled as he yanked his shirt over his head, his breathing erratic, hands shaking so violently that he struggled to button his pants. Every second he spent in that room felt like a noose tightening around his throat.

The Omega was still saying something, soft words, coaxing, confused. But he couldn't hear them. He didn't want to hear them.

The scent clung to his skin, thick and suffocating, as if trying to burrow into his very bones. It made his stomach churn, his body reject it in a way that felt unnatural. He felt tainted, like something had sunk into him that he would never be able to scrub away.

His breath hitched. His chest ached, his ribs squeezing tight around his lungs. He felt sick.

But he ran.

The moment his feet hit the pavement outside, his body lurched forward before he could even think. He was still shaking. Still trembling. His legs felt weak, his muscles raw from tension, but he forced himself forward.

Step after step.

Away.

Away.

He needed to get away.

The night air was cold against his skin, but it did nothing to soothe the feverish heat crawling through his body. His breaths came fast, shallow, gasping as though he couldn't pull in enough oxygen. He could still feel the Omega's scent on him, thick and heavy, choking him.

His vision blurred.

His hands were clenched into fists at his sides, nails digging into his palms so hard it hurt. But he welcomed the pain. It grounded him. Reminded him that he was still here. Still him.

He didn't stop running until he reached his house.

The door slammed behind him.

Silence.

For a moment, the world stood still.

And then the shaking came back.

Violent. Uncontrollable.

His knees buckled, and he barely caught himself against the nearest wall. His fingers dug into the wood, his breaths coming in ragged gasps. His body was rejecting it.

Rejecting everything.

He could still feel the Omega's hands on him, could still hear her voice, could still smell her. His body hated it. His instincts recoiled,

his stomach twisting in knots. He wanted to rip his own skin off just to get rid of the sensation.

His breath hitched.

A sob tore out of him before he could stop it.

It was raw. Choked. Forced past his lips like it had been trying to escape for hours. His chest clenched, throat burning, his entire body wracked with trembling, uncontrollable shudders.

He slid down against the wall, pressing his forehead against his knees, his arms wrapped around himself as if trying to hold himself together.

But he couldn't.

His body was rejecting what it should have accepted.

His instincts weren't normal.

An Alpha was supposed to crave an Omega. Need them.

But he—he had run away.

He had nearly vomited.

He had felt like he was dying.

Ivan’s fingers curled into his shirt, clutching the fabric so tightly it nearly tore. His jaw clenched so hard his teeth ached.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

The memory of it, of the scent, of the touch, of the sheer suffocating wrongness—was seared into him.

He couldn’t escape it.

He couldn’t run from himself.

And in the heavy, crushing silence of his empty house, Ivan realized something.

He was broken.

In the suffocating darkness behind his eyelids, all he could see was Till.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry Ivan..

Chapter 6: Drink With Me

Chapter Summary

> Ivan wished he hadn't yelled. Wished he hadn't snapped. Wished Till had stayed just a moment longer so he could take it all back, stitch the pieces up before they bled too much.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning, Ivan wasn't himself.

He tried to be. Pulled on his uniform. Slapped cold water against his face until the redness from his eyes faded enough to look passable. He even forced a crooked grin at his reflection, a lopsided attempt at the smile people had come to expect from him. But the mirror only offered a stranger back

Too pale.

Too hollow.

Eyes sunken deep into dark bruises that hadn't been there yesterday.

His classmates glanced his way as he walked down the halls, whispering just low enough for him to hear but not confront.

"Did he get in a fight?"

"Looks like he hasn't slept in days."

“Maybe he’s just hungover?”

They didn’t know. And he couldn’t tell them.

His body ached from holding itself together. Every step felt like dragging lead through water. But still, he moved. Still, he smiled. That stupid, practiced smile.

Until—

“Ivan.”

He froze. His chest clenched before he turned around.

Till.

Till, with furrowed brows, storming up to him in that way he always did, blunt and loud and impossible to ignore. His voice cut through the haze like a blade.

“What the fuck happened to you?”

Ivan blinked. His throat dried up instantly.

Till was staring at him, eyes sharp, accusing, but there was something else under the anger. Worry. Maybe fear.

“Where were you last night? I called you like—ten times. You didn’t answer. You didn’t reply. What the hell, Ivan?”

Ivan swallowed hard. Looked away. He shoved his hands into his pockets and forced his shoulders to relax.

“I’m fine.”

“Bullshit.”

His heart jumped.

Till stepped closer, eyes narrowing. Ivan could smell that familiar hint of mint on him, so faint, so Till. Comforting and clean and right.

It made something Inside him ache.

“You look like shit,” Till said bluntly. “Did someone hurt you? Were you, are you sick? What’s going on?”

Ivan clenched his jaw.

“I told you, I’m just tired.”

“You don’t look tired. You look like you’ve been dragged through hell. You’ve never—”

“I said I’m fine, Till!”

The words ripped out of him, sharper than he intended. Like a gun shot. Loud. Uncontrolled. Too much.

It echoed in the hallway.

People turned to look.

Till stood still. Frozen. Shock briefly flashing across his face before he swallowed it down.

Ivan’s breath hitched.

He saw it then, the slight flinch in Till’s shoulders. The way his mouth pressed into a thin line. The way his eyes dimmed just a little.

Realization struck fast and brutal.

He fucked up.

Again.

“I—” Ivan reached out, words tangling in his throat. “I didn’t mean to yell. I’m sorry. I just—”

But Till cut him off with a soft, brittle laugh. Not the usual loud, obnoxious Till-laugh that echoed across rooms. No. This one barely made it past his lips.

“It’s fine,” he said. Voice too quiet. Too even.

Too not Till.

“I guess you’re tired. Sorry for… concerning. I was just—"

He hesitated, and then forced a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“I was about to tell you. I’m confessing to Mizi today.”

The words sliced through Ivan like a blade. Too quick to dodge. Too deep to ignore.

“So yeah,” Till added, taking a slow step back. “Wish me luck, asshole.”

He turned.

Walked away.

Didn’t look back.

The words replayed in his head on a loop, each repetition a little duller, a little heavier, until they sank into his chest like stones in water.

I'm confessing to Mizi today.

His legs felt numb.

His fingers curled into his palms, nails biting into skin that no longer felt like his. He should say something—run after Till, pull him back, tell him the truth, scream if he had to—but he didn't.

Because he knew.

He knew that if he opened his mouth now, all that would come out was ruin.

He'd only make it worse.

His chest rose, then fell. Slow. Shallow. As if his body couldn't decide whether to keep breathing or just give up on that too.

He stood there for another minute. Maybe more.

And then he turned and walked away.

The pavement blurred beneath his feet, the campus melting into a dull smear of grey and noise that didn't quite touch him. People passed. Conversations hummed. Birds sang somewhere in the distance. But none of it reached him.

It was like watching the world through thick glass.

He dragged himself home, one heavy step after another, until he reached the front door, pushed it open, and collapsed inside like a puppet cut from its strings.

Silence greeted him.

No scent. No voices. Just the hollow hum of electricity and the weight of a house too quiet to call it home.

Ivan kicked off his shoes without care. Didn't bother changing. He staggered to his bed and collapsed face-down into the mattress, burying himself in the sheets that still smelled faintly of him, of the person he'd been before last night broke him into pieces.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

He wished he hadn't yelled. Wished he hadn't snapped. Wished Till had stayed just a moment longer so he could take it all back, stitch the pieces up before they bled too much.

Ivan curled tighter into himself.

Maybe if he slept again, the pain would dull. Maybe in sleep, he could forget how wrong the world felt now. Maybe he could dream about a version of himself that didn't ruin everything he touched.

He buried his face deeper into the pillow.

And let the darkness take him.

Ivan jolted awake.

A loud thud. The door slamming against the wall. The sudden burst of cold air rushing into his room.

He shot up, disoriented, heart hammering. His limbs tangled in his sheets. The room spun for a moment before it settled and then he saw him.

Till.

Standing in the doorway.

Chest heaving like he'd run the whole way there. Eyes wide. Red-rimmed. And shining.

Like he'd been holding something in for too long.

Like he was about to cry.

“Fix yourself and come,” Till said.

Ivan blinked, still caught in the fog of sleep and grief. “What…?”

But before he could finish, Till cut him off, his voice sharp and trembling.

“Drink with me.”

He didn’t wait for a response. Just turned and walked back out.

Ivan sat frozen for a heartbeat. Maybe two.

Then the weight of it all hit him.

Till hadn’t looked like that—raw, bare, open, since they were kids. And those eyes… that crack in his voice… it didn’t sound like a victory.

It sounded like something breaking.

Ivan swung his legs over the edge of the bed. His shirt stuck to his back with cold sweat. He ran a shaky hand through his hair and stared at the open door.

Till wanted him there.

Even if it was only for a drink. Even if it wasn’t what he wanted.

That was enough for now.

He forced himself up, pulled on a hoodie, splashed water on his face without even looking in the mirror this time. No smile this time. Just motion.

When he stepped outside, the hallway was empty, but he could hear the front door creak open.

Till was waiting.

And Ivan followed.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is short. I don't and haven't drink in my entire existence, so bear with me in the next chapter, huhu.

Chapter 7: A Coward

Chapter Summary

> Ivan froze, shock rattling through him like ice water down his spine. His eyes widened, hands hovering mid-air, not quite touching. Till's lips were chapped and fever-warm, tasting of salt and cheap gin. His breath was shaky, ragged against Ivan's cheek.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They ended up in the nearest cheap bar just outside campus, dim lighting, cracked leather seats, a jukebox wheezing out old songs in the background. It smelled faintly of grease, cigarette smoke, and stale liquor. The kind of place people went when they didn't want to be seen, only forgotten.

Ivan sat across from Till in a booth tucked in the corner, his back to the wall. He hadn't said a word since they arrived. Not when Till ordered the drinks. Not when the first round landed between them with a dull thud. Not even when Till downed his first shot like it was water and poured another without blinking.

Ivan just watched.

Till drank like the world might end tonight and he wanted to be too drunk to notice. Glass after glass. His lips pulled into a crooked half-smile, eyes already glassy.

Ivan should've stopped him. Wanted to. His hands curled on his lap, itching to reach out. To tell him to slow down, to breathe, to talk. But he didn't. Because Till didn't come here for sense or advice.

He came here to fall apart.

And Ivan… Ivan would rather be the one who watched over him than the one who drove him away again.

“You know what’s funny?” Till said suddenly, slamming back another shot, voice slurred around the edges. “I actually thought she’d just say no.”

Ivan’s eyes flicked up, quietly meeting Till’s across the dim table. He said nothing.

“I mean, I knew it. Deep down,” Till went on, waving a hand carelessly. “I thought, okay, this is a stupid crush, she’s nice, she’s pretty, she’s sweet, she’s Mizi. Of course she’s gonna say no. I prepared for it, man.”

He leaned forward, elbows on the sticky table, eyes unfocused but bitter.

“But she didn’t say no.”

A pause. Till sucked in a breath that hitched halfway.

“She said… she already has a girlfriend.” He laughed, but it was the hollow kind. “Sua. Sua. Of all people.”

Ivan’s chest twisted.

Till rubbed his face roughly with both hands, then reached for the bottle again. Ivan let him.

“I didn’t even know they were together. How the hell did I not notice? Am I that blind?” he muttered, voice thick. “I just stood there like a dumbass. And you know what I said?”

He looked up, eyes wet.

“I told her congratulations.”

Ivan’s throat burned.

“I actually congratulated her, like some kind of fucking idiot.”

He downed another shot, this one hitting harder than the rest. He coughed, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and laughed again, short, bitter.

“She’s a lesbian, Ivan. A fucking lesbian. How could I not see that?” he groaned, slouching forward until his forehead hit the table with a soft thud. “Fuck, I’m so stupid.”

Ivan stayed quiet, watching the way Till’s shoulders trembled.

It hurt. All of it hurt. Seeing him like this, crumpled and broken and trying to laugh through it. And Ivan couldn’t do a damn thing.

Couldn't reach across that small space between them. Couldn't tell him what he really wanted to say:

You're not stupid, Till.

But all of that would make it worse. So he kept it locked inside.

Till sat back up slowly, eyes half-lidded, face flushed.

Then his gaze found Ivan's.

"What happened last night?"

Ivan blinked. "What?"

"Last night," Till said. "You disappeared. Looked like shit this morning. Everyone's been whispering. So?" He blinked slowly, head tilting. "Where's your girlfriend?"

There was a beat of silence.

"We broke up," Ivan said flatly. No hesitation. No pause.

"Oh." Till blinked again, surprised. "Okay. You suddenly spoke up, huh?" He snorted, half-smile forming. "Thought you weren't listening to me."

Ivan gave a small smile.

“You don’t suit each other anyway,” Till mumbled, then hiccuped softly. “She was too… I dunno. Plastic. Not your type.”

He leaned forward again, hands folding on the table. His voice dropped lower.

“You know what?” he said, softer this time. “I missed you, asshole.”

Ivan froze.

“I really did.” Till laughed again, that same too quiet sound, and rubbed at his eyes. “You’ve changed. You’re avoiding me. You don’t text me back. You smile like a mannequin now.”

Ivan looked down at his hands. The knuckles were pale from clenching.

“You… you…” Till’s words started to slur, his chin wobbling just slightly. “I thought you forgot about me.”

His voice cracked. And that was it.

Ivan looked up.

Till wasn’t smiling anymore.

His eyes were red. Glassy. Wet.

“You—you fucker—you said you’d never leave. But then you got a girlfriend and you disappeared and I thought maybe I was just… just annoying. Or not enough anymore.”

Ivan’s breath caught.

“I thought maybe you stopped needing me.”

Till’s shoulders slumped. His head dropped forward again, mumbling into the table.

“I just… I just wanted someone to want me back.”

The sentence hit Ivan like a blow to the chest.

Ivan reached across the table, fingers brushing against Till’s knuckles.

He didn’t say anything.

Because if he opened his mouth now—

He might say *everything*.

Ivan’s fingertips brushed gently against Till’s knuckles, hesitant at first, like he wasn’t sure he had the right to touch him anymore. The skin was warm, slightly damp from the condensation of the glass Till had been gripping too tightly. His fingers twitched at the contact, but he didn’t pull away.

“I’m sorry,” Ivan whispered, voice low and hoarse, almost carried off by the soft hum of the bar’s music. It barely sounded like him.

Slowly, he stood up and walked around the table, the wood creaking beneath his weight as he slid into the seat beside Till. Not across from him. Beside. Closer. Where he could catch him if he fell. Where he should’ve been all along.

Till didn’t even lift his head. His body sagged, one hand clutched tightly around his glass, the other limp by his side.

“Fuck you, Ivan,” Till mumbled, and his voice cracked at the end. “Fuck you for—fuck—”

His words dissolved into a mess of broken syllables and quiet gasps. Ivan didn’t speak, didn’t flinch. He just nodded slightly.

I know. I know. I'm sorry.

He wanted to say it out loud, but the lump in his throat made it impossible. So instead, he just stayed still, his shoulder pressed softly to Till’s, grounding him.

And then, without warning, Till turned.

There was no hesitation. No cue. No drunken slur to preface it.

Just movement, sudden and sharp. His fingers clutching the front of Ivan's shirt, trembling with force he probably didn't even realize he had.

He pulled him in.

And kissed him.

It wasn't a question. It wasn't slow.

It just was.

Ivan's entire body locked up, breath catching in his throat as Till's lips crashed into his. The kiss was clumsy, desperate, tasting of cheap gin, salt, and something aching and raw. Till's lips were chapped, fever-warm and trembling. His breath came in ragged bursts, brushing against Ivan's skin like an apology he couldn't say out loud.

Ivan froze, shock ricocheting through his limbs like ice water flooding every nerve ending. His hands hovered mid-air, unsure of where to go, afraid of holding on too tight and making the moment shatter.

This wasn't right.

Till was drunk. Hurting. Confused.

But gods, Ivan had wanted this. For years. In the quiet between arguments, in the silence of his room at night, in every glance across the lecture hall, every time he'd watched Till walk away without looking back. He'd swallowed the wanting like poison and prayed it wouldn't kill him.

He kissed him back, cautiously at first, like something sacred. His lips moved gently against Till's, trying not to take, only to meet him halfway.

One of his hands found Till's cheek, thumb brushing along the side of his face, then trailing down to the curve of his jaw. His fingertips traced lightly, memorizing the warmth, the softness, the sharp lines of someone he thought he'd never be allowed to touch like this.

Their foreheads bumped slightly. Ivan tilted his head, deepening the kiss just a breath more. Not demanding—just answering. Letting Till know he was here, that he hadn't left. That he never wanted to.

The kiss wasn't perfect. It was messy and uneven. It stuttered with the ache of too many unsaid things, with the kind of grief that doesn't have a name. It was a kiss between two broken people, trying to press the shattered pieces of themselves into something whole, even if only for a moment.

Till's fingers were still gripping Ivan's shirt, pulling him close like he was afraid of what would happen if he let go.

And then Ivan felt it, a single tear sliding down Till's cheek, trailing across his skin and soaking into his collar.

It grounded him.

It hurt.

It made him want to weep.

He kissed Till slower now, mouth softening, hand cupping the back of his head with a tenderness he'd never let himself feel before. He didn't care that this was wrong. That this was born out of alcohol and pain and confusion.

Because for this moment, Till was in his arms. Their hearts were thudding against each other like war drums. And Ivan finally felt real.

But just as quickly as it came, it slipped through his fingers.

Till broke the kiss with a shaky breath. His eyes fluttered, lashes brushing against Ivan's cheek before they closed. The grip on Ivan's shirt loosened.

He slumped forward with a quiet, tired sound. His head found Ivan's shoulder, nuzzling into the curve of his neck with the weightless trust of someone who had finally run out of ways to hurt.

His breathing evened out, warm, steady, slow.

He'd passed out.

Ivan didn't move.

He didn't dare.

He just sat there, heart cracked open, arms around the boy he loved like a prayer he never thought would be answered. He held Till like something fragile. Like glass. Like this moment would disappear if he even breathed too loud.

And still—he stayed.

Then, with the care of someone carrying something fragile and precious, he called a cab, scooped Till into his arms, and held him close for the ride home. Till's head stayed nestled in the crook of his neck the whole way, breath hitching now and then like he might cry even in sleep.

When they reached Till's house, Ivan knocked once. The door creaked open almost immediately, as if someone had been waiting.

"Io?" Ivan said softly.

Till's mother stood in the doorway, her eyes widening when she saw them.

"Oh, goodness, dear," she said, a hand rising to her chest. Her voice was like warm honey, soft and welcoming. "Please, come in. Come in."

The warmth of the house was immediate, the scent of lemon balm and chamomile lingering in the air. Ivan stepped inside, still cradling Till.

“What happened?” Io asked gently, guiding them in.

Ivan looked down at the boy in his arms, then up at her.

“Stress, ma’am,” he said simply. “School. He just… needed a break.”

Io’s expression softened, worry tugging at the corners of her kind eyes. She reached out and brushed Till’s bangs from his face, the gesture full of quiet love.

“You always took care of him,” she said, almost wistful. “Even back then.”

Ivan lowered his gaze.

“I should go now,” he said, shifting slightly.

But Io gently touched his arm.

“It’s late,” she said. “Why don’t you stay the night? Like before?”

Like before.

Ivan's heart clenched.

Before.

Before things got messy. Before he had to pretend he didn't love Till. Before everything went wrong.

"I missed you, child," Io added softly.

Ivan swallowed hard, tried to smile, tried to mean it. "If that's what you wish, ma'am."

She nodded, eyes kind. "You look tired. Change and go to bed with Till, hmm?"

Ivan hesitated, then nodded.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Io patted his arm once, then turned away quietly, leaving him alone with the boy who haunted every corner of his heart.

Ivan carried Till up the stairs, his limbs heavy but familiar. He laid him on the bed with practiced ease, like a memory coming back to life. And for a second, everything was just like it used to be.

Except everything was different now.

Ivan stood by the bed, unsure.

His hand hovered near Till's cheek.

He didn't know if he was allowed to touch him anymore.

But oh God, he wanted to.

So he let himself.

Ivan sat at the edge of the bed for a moment longer, breath shallow, chest tight. Then slowly, almost reverently, he reached out. His hand trembled as he cupped Till's face, the calloused warmth of his palm meeting soft, flushed skin. His thumb traced the edge of Till's cheekbone, brushing away a stray tear that had dried there.

It had been a while since he'd been this close. Too long. So many months filled with distance, silence, longing. But now, Till was here. Right here. Asleep and vulnerable and heartbroken.

Ivan tucked a few strands of silver-grey hair behind Till's ear, careful not to wake him. His fingers lingered there, trailing lightly down the side of Till's neck. His skin felt warm beneath his touch, alive, fragile.

He studied him. Every line of his face. The small furrow in his brow that stayed even in sleep. The long lashes that cast soft shadows against flushed skin. The slight pout of his lips, slightly parted, still tasting of regret and alcohol.

Ivan leaned in closer, just enough for his forehead to rest against Till's temple.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, his voice cracking. "Sorry, Till… for being a coward."

He drew in a shaky breath, closing his eyes as if it would keep the ache from spilling over.

"I missed you too," he murmured, almost too quietly to hear. "More than you'll ever know."

For a moment, there was nothing but the sound of their breathing. The quiet hum of the night outside the window. The soft rustle of sheets as Till shifted in sleep.

Ivan didn't move. He didn't want to break the moment. He stayed there, forehead to temple, his fingers still gently cupping Till's cheek like he was the most precious thing in the world.

Because he was.

He always had been.

Ivan didn't mean to fall asleep.

But somewhere between the silence and the warmth of Till's palm in his, Ivan's body gave in. He lay down beside him carefully, careful not to jostle the bed too much, afraid even the smallest movement might break the fragile peace they had stumbled into.

Ivan kept holding Till's hand—soft, a little calloused from guitar strings and charcoal-stained fingers. The kind of hand that had once shoved him away and pulled him back in the same breath. Ivan clung to it like a lifeline.

The room smelled faintly of mint and laundry powder. Familiar. Comforting. It grounded him.

Ivan turned his head to face Till, watching his chest rise and fall in that slow, steady rhythm. The alcohol had dulled everything, Till would wake with a headache and no memory of what happened, no recollection of the kiss, the tears, the raw way he had said *"I thought you forgot about me…"*

But Ivan would remember.

Every second.

And maybe that was enough.

He let his eyes close slowly, lips still parted around a whisper of Till's name he didn't say aloud. The ache in his chest didn't vanish, but it quieted. Just enough.

For the first time in a long, long time, Ivan fell asleep without dreaming of what he'd lost.

Because for one night, just one.. he had it back. Even if only he would remember.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much, everyone. Really, I cried while reading the comments, as dramatic as I am. I didn't think people will love this fic. So.. Next chapter, maybe things will get better.

Chapter 8: Really?

Chapter Summary

> Wide teal eyes, too tired to hide how much they were searching. He watched Ivan like he wanted to ask him to stay but didn't know how. Like he almost said something, but the words got caught on the edge of his teeth and never made it out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The early morning light crept in through the thin curtains, casting soft golden streaks across Till's small room. The world outside was barely awake, and inside, the silence was gentle, only the faint sounds of birds and the rustle of leaves beyond the window.

A soft knock came at the door, followed by the sweet, familiar voice of Io.

"Boys, breakfast is ready."

Ivan stirred first, a light sleeper even at the best of times. A dull throb pulsed behind his eyes, the kind of ache that told him last night's alcohol was catching up with him. He blinked against the light, trying to ground himself as the haze of sleep cleared.

His gaze dropped to Till, still fast asleep beside him.

His heart clenched.

Till's legs were tangled with his, one arm loosely curled over the pillow between them, face tilted toward Ivan like it had been

searching for warmth. His breath was steady, peaceful. Ivan, for a moment, just studied him, memorizing every detail up close, from the way Till's lashes rested on his cheeks to the soft rise and fall of his chest.

Ivan reached out, carefully brushing a few strands of grey-streaked hair from Till's forehead.

He looked smaller like this. Softer. As if last night's pain was just a nightmare that hadn't really happened. But it did. And Ivan still remembered every second.

"Good morning, ma'am," Ivan whispered as he stepped out of the room, voice still hoarse from sleep and his headache. He gently closed the door behind him and shuffled to the kitchen.

Io smiled at him over her shoulder, a pan already sizzling. "Oh, dear, your voice. You boys drank quite a bit, didn't you?"

Ivan scratched the back of his neck sheepishly. "A bit more than we should've, I think."

"You should rest. I've got it—"

"No, please." Ivan was already moving, grabbing plates from the drying rack, setting them down on the small kitchen table with practiced ease. "Let me help. It's the least I can do."

Io watched him for a moment, her eyes softening. "You really haven't changed. Still the same helpful boy."

He smiled faintly. It was hard to hold the expression, with the tightness still in his chest, but he tried. “I missed this, ma’am. Missed you.”

Her eyes crinkled with a knowing kind of affection. “Then stay more often. Till may act stubborn, but he’s happiest when you’re around. Always has been.”

Ivan swallowed thickly and turned back to the table.

Once everything was ready, he returned to Till’s room.

He opened the door slowly and stepped inside. The room was still dim, and Till was still buried under the blanket, curled into himself like a grumpy cat.

“Till,” Ivan said softly, kneeling beside the bed. “Time to wake up.”

A muffled grumble answered him. “Five more minutes…”

Ivan smirked. “You’re gonna be late.”

Till’s eyes flew open in mild panic. “Shit—what time is it?”

“It’s Sunday.”

Till stared at him. Realization dawned. “Asshole,” he muttered, shoving a pillow weakly at Ivan’s face before collapsing back.

Ivan chuckled, and it felt oddly good to laugh.

“Come on. Your mom made ginger tea."

Till groaned, pushing himself upright and holding his head. “Ughhh… I'm dying.”

“Serves you right,” Ivan said, standing up and offering his hand.

Till tried to stand, but his legs wobbled. Ivan caught him instinctively, strong hands wrapping around his arm.

“Careful.”

Till didn’t protest the touch this time. “I am never drinking again,” he declared dramatically.

“You said that last time,” Ivan said, steadying him with an arm around his back.

“And this time I mean it.”

They walked together to the kitchen, Till leaning slightly into Ivan’s side.

Io smiled when she saw them enter. “Till, here’s your tea. It’ll help.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Till mumbled, taking the mug and breathing in the warm, spicy scent.

They sat around the small table, the three of them, like a fragment of an old memory, and for a while, it felt like the pain of yesterday didn’t exist. The kitchen was filled with the soft clinking of cutlery, the faint hum of the morning radio, and Io’s gentle chatter.

Till sipped his ginger tea slowly, both hands wrapped around the warm mug like he needed it to anchor himself. The bitterness made him grimace at first, but as the warmth slid down his throat, he sighed —part relief, part exhaustion.

“This is magic,” he murmured.

Io gave him a look over her cup. “It’s ginger, not magic.”

“Same thing,” Till said, his voice still a little rough around the edges.

Ivan quietly set down a plate in front of him, a perfectly fried egg, garlic rice, and some dried fish, crispy at the edges, just the way Till used to like it as a kid.

“You remembered,” Till said, blinking at the plate, then at Ivan.

Ivan shrugged like it was nothing. “Your mom said to make you eat properly. I just followed orders.”

Till muttered something under his breath, but he dug into the food without complaint, clearly starving. The meal was comforting, nostalgic even, like a memory being slowly revived with every bite.

“Do you boys want to do anything today?” Io asked, sitting down with her own plate. “It’s been a while since the house had so much noise in it. Might as well make the most of it.”

“I was thinking of dying quietly on the couch,” Till replied, deadpan.

Io rolled her eyes. “Dramatic. You get that from your father.”

“Great, now I’m cursed.”

Ivan chuckled under his breath and sipped his coffee. It was a quiet moment, but it felt like a small kind of peace. He could almost pretend things were okay. Almost.

Till glanced at him over the rim of his mug. “You okay?”

Ivan looked up. “Me?”

“You look like you’ve been hit by a truck.”

Ivan smirked. “I feel like it too.”

“See? Karma for tricking me about the time.”

“Was worth it.”

Their eyes met, and held, just a second too long.

Till looked away first.

Io cleared her throat softly, like she’d noticed the shift in air. “Ivan, could you grab the dried herbs from the pantry? The ones in the glass jar. I want to steep some later for Till.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

Ivan stood and slipped into the pantry.

Till waited until he was out of earshot before speaking.

“He’s different,” he said, almost to himself.

Io didn’t look surprised. “He’s hurting.”

Till’s brow furrowed. “Because of the drinking?”

“Because of you,” Io said gently. “And everything that’s been left unsaid between you two.”

Till stared down at his plate, suddenly no longer hungry.

Io reached over, placing her hand over his. “You don’t have to figure everything out right now. But maybe… it’s time to stop pretending you don’t see him.”

Till’s throat tightened. He wanted to argue, but the words caught somewhere between his heart and his mouth.

Ivan returned, holding the jar carefully. “Found it.”

Io took it with a smile, standing up to prepare the steep.

Till muttered, “I need air,” and stood up. His legs were steadier now, but he didn’t say anything as he walked out to the small balcony, barefoot.

Ivan hesitated, then followed.

The morning breeze was cool. Till leaned against the railing, eyes on the clouds. Ivan stood beside him, close, but not touching.

Neither of them spoke for a while.

Finally, Ivan asked, “Did you sleep okay?”

Till nodded. “Surprisingly… yeah.”

“You… um.” Ivan glanced at him. “You clung to me all night.”

Till gave him a sideways glare. “Lies.”

“You did,” Ivan said, smiling faintly. “You were like a sleepy octopus.”

Till made a face. “Gross.”

“You’re the one who wouldn’t let go.”

Till was silent for a moment, then mumbled, “It’s warm, okay?”

Ivan laughed softly, and the sound eased the tension in the air.

But then, the silence that followed stretched too long. Ivan looked at him again.

“Do you remember what you said last night?”

Till stiffened. His grip on the railing tightened.

“I remember…” he said quietly. “Pieces."

Ivan didn't push. Just waited.

Till exhaled. "I remember you being there. I remember… saying things. Things I probably shouldn't have."

"They weren't things you should be ashamed of," Ivan said.

Till glanced at him. "Even if I said I wanted to forget everything?"

Ivan's smile faded. "Even then."

Till turned back to the sky. "I don't know what I want, Ivan."

"I know," Ivan said. "I'm not asking you to."

There was another pause.

"I just… I wanted to make sure you felt safe. That's all."

Till nodded. "Thanks."

Another quiet moment passed, but it wasn't as heavy this time. Ivan leaned on the railing next to him, their arms almost brushing.

The silence between them stretched, not cold—just heavy, like the air was holding its breath. The breeze ruffled Till's silver hair, and Ivan found himself staring, memorizing every strand that moved.

Then Till spoke, voice quieter than before. "I don't know what that head of yours is always thinking. But…" He tapped his chest lightly.

"Know that here? Yeah. Don't forget that. Even if the world ends, you still have your best friend."

Ivan looked at him, something raw flickering in his eyes. "I know."

Till chuckled lightly, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "You're not heartbroken or something, right?"

Ivan blinked. "What?"

"Like… that Omega." Till glanced down at the railing, fingers drumming restlessly.

"You didn't just make her your girlfriend 'cause you couldn't have someone else, right? It's not like you've actually been in love or anything."

Ivan looked away.

His chest tightened.

He swallowed, hard.

Then quietly, he said, “I’ve been in love.”

Till turned sharply. “What?”

Ivan didn’t look at him. His eyes were on the sky.

“I’ve been in love,” he repeated, softer, slower. “I am in love.”

There was a pause. A beat of silence that cracked with weight.

Till blinked, then gave a strained smile. “Really? Unrequited too? Damn. We’re the same.” He nudged Ivan gently with his elbow. “So, who is it? Come on. Who broke your heart?”

Ivan clenched his jaw. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?” Till leaned in a little, his expression lighter now, teasing. “I swear I’ll keep it secret. Cross my heart.”

“No,” Ivan said again, this time firmer. “I can’t.”

Till opened his mouth, maybe to ask again, but Ivan cut him off. “Sorry,” he said, turning his eyes down. “Let’s stop this topic.”

The air shifted.

Till stared at him for a moment, searching his face like it held answers he wasn't ready to say aloud. Then he leaned back slightly.

"Oh," he murmured. "Okay."

Ivan stood up, brushing invisible dust from his jeans.

"I should go now."

Till didn't move.

Ivan turned toward the door. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said, glancing over his shoulder.

Till was still.

But his eyes… they tracked Ivan like a tether. Something unspoken passed between them, soft, unsure. He didn't say goodbye. Didn't make a joke or brush it off like he usually would.

He just looked.

Wide teal eyes, too tired to hide how much they were searching. He watched Ivan like he wanted to ask him to stay but didn't know how. Like he almost said something, but the words got caught on the edge of his teeth and never made it out.

Ivan met his gaze, heart hammering. He wanted to speak—God, he wanted to reach back across the silence and tell him everything. But he couldn’t.

Not yet.

So he gave the smallest smile. One only Till would understand.

Till blinked slowly, once.

Then he nodded. Barely.

Ivan forced himself to look away.

He said goodbye to Io on the way out, her warm voice wishing him well as she handed him a small container of leftovers.

But all he could think about was the weight of Till’s gaze, the way it lingered.

The silence that wasn’t angry, just aching.

And how badly he wished he’d said more.

Chapter End Notes

The communication ain't communicating. Ivan is so me. Frfr.

Chapter 9: What if?

Chapter Summary

> “You’re wasting a lot of time, you know,” she said, her voice soft but shaped like a knife.
>
> “All that pining. That perfect posture. That *performance*.”
>
> Ivan’s jaw clenched. “You know nothing about me.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the days that followed, Ivan acted like nothing had changed.

He woke up. Went to class. Laughed at jokes he didn’t hear and answered questions like he hadn’t been unraveling from the inside. He brushed his teeth, fixed his hair, slipped on that stupid, easy smile. The one he’d worn since he was a kid. The one everyone knew him for. The one no one questioned.

He was good at pretending.

He always had been.

Even now, after everything, after Till’s kiss, after that night at the bar, after the quiet ride home with his head on Ivan’s shoulder, he went back to pretending.

So did Till.

Whatever fragile, aching thing that had bloomed between them that

night… was gone by morning. Vanished beneath the haze of hangovers and awkward silence. Till didn't talk about it. Ivan didn't ask.

Because everything was normal.

Painfully, excruciatingly normal.

Till still showed up to class with messy hair and tired eyes. He still scribbled in the margins of his notebooks. Still snorted at Ivan's dumb jokes and called him an asshole when he teased too hard.

And when he passed by Mizi in the hall, he still blushed.

Still smiled.

Even though she had turned him down. Even though she'd chosen Sua, her girlfriend, who kissed her forehead in broad daylight like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Till still laughed around Mizi.

Still got flustered.

Still… looked at her like she was the center of his stupid, kind, infuriating universe.

And Ivan watched it all unfold.

Just like he always had.

From the background. From the sidelines. From the place he had carved for himself in silence and longing.

He told himself it was okay.

That it *didn't* matter.

That the kiss hadn't meant anything—not really. That Till had been drunk. Broken. Looking for comfort in the nearest thing that felt familiar. That it wasn't a confession. It wasn't a beginning.

It was just a moment.

One of many Ivan would bury deep inside himself and never speak of again.

He thought he was hiding it well.

He thought his mask was perfect.

Until someone noticed.

"You're staring again."

The voice snapped him out of his thoughts like a switch had flip.

Ivan hadn't noticed anyone approach. He turned, gaze meeting an unfamiliar yet oddly composed face.

Sua.

She was shorter than him, but carried herself like she wasn't. Her hair was cut into a sharp bob, sleek and dark, framing her face with deliberate softness. But her heliotrope-colored eyes were anything but gentle. They pinned him in place.

Ivan's brows furrowed. "Do you know me?"

She raised an eyebrow, lips twitching with the barest hint of amusement. "Aren't you famous?" she said, tone matter-of-fact. "The most perfect guy. The dominant Alpha of the campus. The one everyone wants. The one everyone lusted over."

Ivan flinched, but barely. "I wasn't staring," he said stiffly. "Just… observing."

She snorted.

"That's cute."

Ivan's jaw ticked, his eyes narrowing.

She stepped closer, arms crossed loosely over her chest, but there was nothing relaxed about her presence. “I’m also an Alpha,” she said. “As you can tell."

He didn’t respond, but the shift in his shoulders was answer enough.

“Then you already know,” she continued, her voice like satin hiding a knife. “Your pheromones are all over the place.”

Her steps brought her even closer. The air between them shifted, her scent was a distinct honey citrus, sweet and sharp. Refreshing, but bold. Not soft.

“And you,” she said, now almost toe to toe with him, “reek of regret.”

Ivan stiffened.

“Sadness,” she added. “And longing.”

He didn’t move. His own scent, fresh burning wood, once calm and grounded, was now clinging too close to his skin. Smoky, too sharp. The kind of fire that doesn’t warm, just reminds you of what’s been lost.

“You reek of it, Ivan,” Sua said, eyes never wavering. “No matter how calm you try to play it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. Flat. Final. Like a door slamming shut.

But Sua didn’t step back. Didn’t ease up.

She hummed instead, low and unimpressed. “Sure,” she said.

"Burn all you want. Just don’t pretend you’re not on fire.”

Ivan’s fists clenched at his sides, the muscles in his arms straining beneath the fabric of his shirt. The burn of his own scent—smoke, heat, desperation was starting to choke him. But he didn’t say a word. Couldn’t.

Behind Sua, there was that sound again.

Laughter.

Till’s laugh.

Ivan’s eyes flicked toward it like instinct. A curse he couldn't unlearn.

Till’s head was thrown back, eyes squinting in that way that made his cheekbones more defined. Mizi leaned closer, brushing invisible lint from his collar, her fingers lingering just long enough to make it personal. She said something low, and Till’s lips curled slowly. The pink flush on his cheeks wasn’t shy. It was pleased.

It was warm.

Effortless.

Sua followed his gaze, chewing briefly on the inside of her cheek. Then she exhaled through her nose. Sharp. Dry. Almost like pity, but not quite.

“You’re wasting a lot of time, you know,” she said, her voice soft but shaped like a knife.

“All that pining. That perfect posture. That *performance*.”

Ivan’s jaw clenched. “You know nothing about me.”

Sua stared at him for a second, unreadable. Then she shrugged one shoulder.

“Perhaps I don’t. It’s just my observation though.”

Her gaze lingered for a moment longer, then narrowed, not unkind, but unwavering. "Don’t look at me like you’re about to break.”

He swallowed, but his throat stayed tight. His lungs wouldn’t fill right.

Still, he said nothing.

Sua let the silence stretch between them. She didn’t try to fill it. She just let him sit in it.

“Sua, by the way.” she added finally, her voice cooled now. “But you probably already knew that.”

She turned and walked off like she hadn’t just cracked something inside him open.

Mizi looked up before Sua even reached her. No words were exchanged. Just a glance, and then Mizi reached for her, threading their fingers together with casual intimacy. As if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Ivan stared at them.

At how easy it looked.

At how wanted they both were.

Then he looked down at his hands.

Calloused. Strong. Useless.

They smelled like *ash*.

And nothing he burned ever stayed warm.

Mizi’s hand lifted, fingers fluttering in a small, familiar wave, meant for Till.

Till turned, catching it instantly, his smile dimming just slightly from laughter to something fond. His fingers raised in return, an easy farewell, the kind you give someone who makes saying goodbye feel like a pause, not an end.

And then his eyes shifted, finally.

They landed on Ivan.

Ivan didn't flinch, but his breath did stall in his chest.

"Hey, Ivan," Till called, jogging a few steps to close the space between them. "It's you. Where are you heading at?"

His voice hadn't changed. Still light. Still casual. Still the exact tone Ivan used to hear when they were walking to class together, when things weren't weighed down by everything they weren't saying now.

"I was about to grab lunch," Ivan said, sliding his hands into his pockets to keep them from twitching. "You want to come?"

Till blinked, then gave a little shrug and a nod.

"Yeah, of course."

As they walked, the silence wasn't uncomfortable, but it was full. Full of things Ivan didn't know how to bring up and Till probably wouldn't notice unless they spilled out by accident.

They ended up at a small café just off campus. One of Till's favorites, though he always pretended it wasn't. Ivan only knew because Till always ordered the same thing and got annoyed if they were out of his usual croissants.

They sat near the window. Light poured in, catching on the tips of Till's gray hair. It looked silver in the sun.

Ivan poked at the corner of his tray, then glanced up.

"I see that you're still friends with Mizi."

Till paused mid-bite, then swallowed. "Yeahh…" He rubbed the back of his neck. "I was actually surprised too."

Ivan tilted his head, eyes searching. "Yeah?"

"It was awkward at first," Till admitted. "I thought it'd never be the same again after everything. But we talked. I dunno… I guess I'm still happy we're still the same, in some ways."

Ivan's stomach twisted.

Still the same.

That phrase echoed too loud in his head.

He forced a chuckle, leaning back a little in his chair. “You’ve always been good at that.”

Till raised an eyebrow. “Good at what?”

Ivan looked down at his tray. “Keeping people around.”

There was a beat of silence. Not cold, just unspoken things hanging in the air.

Till smiled faintly, but didn't respond right away. He took another bite, more thoughtful this time. Ivan watched him, soaking in the way he chewed, the way his fingers curled around the plastic fork, the way his eyes softened when he wasn’t thinking too hard.

Ivan hesitated, then asked, quietly, “Are you happy?”

Till blinked, like he hadn’t expected the question. He let out a low chuckle, rubbing his neck again. “For everything that happened?” He paused, then nodded slowly. “Oh yeah. I guess… I really am happy.”

Till looked genuinely soft.

And Ivan couldn’t look away.

They stepped out into the soft afternoon haze. The cafeteria's dull chatter faded behind them as they walked down the path that forked

out toward the dorms. Till's hands were in his pockets, shoulders a little hunched like always, eyes watching the cracks in the pavement as they moved.

"I missed this, kind of," Till said, breaking the silence. "You know, being around you. You used to be less… distant."

Ivan glanced at him, lips parting slightly, but he said nothing. He didn't trust himself to.

Till smirked faintly, teal eyes flicking upward. "You used to annoy the hell out of me. Always talking, always doing stupid stuff just to get my attention."

Ivan let out a short breath that might've been a laugh. Might've been.

"I kinda hated it sometimes," Till continued. "But at least back then, I never had to guess if you were okay."

Ivan's expression barely shifted. But his chest ached.

Then Till said it lightly, like a stray passing thought. The kind that doesn't know it's about to shatter something.

"…Good thing I never fell for you, huh?"

Ivan stopped walking. Just for a beat. A single second, but it was long enough.

“What?”

Till kept moving ahead, not noticing. “We’d have ruined each other.”

He glanced back at Ivan with a crooked grin, easy, unbothered, completely unaware.

“I mean, you? With someone like me? Disaster waiting to happen.”

Ivan’s throat tightened. His heart was suddenly a drum in his ears. He forced a smile so hard it felt like it might split his face.

“Yeah,” he said. “Good thing.”

But in his mind, the words repeated over and over.

Good thing I never fell for you.

Good thing. Good thing. Good thing.

Good thing. Good thing. Good thing.

Good thing. Good thing. Good thing.

Till turned back around, waving lazily.

“Catch you later, drama king. Shoot me a text when you get home."

And then he was gone.

Ivan stood alone under the gold pale sky. Wind brushed through the trees, and everything smelled like ash and a love that would never be real fulfilled.

He didn’t cry.

But for a moment, he looked like he might.

Chapter End Notes

You're so cruel Till :(
Sua, my queen. You finally arrived!

Sorry everyone, late update.

Chapter 10: Fucked Face

Chapter Summary

> “You’re telling me he had a whole desperate Omega on her knees and still couldn’t get it up, but he’s trailing after some punk Beta like a dog in heat?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a good day.

At least, that was what Ivan told himself.

The air was warm, the sun was low but soft, casting golden light across the cracked sidewalks of the city. There were people everywhere, students spilling out of buildings, laughing, chattering, clutching iced drinks, wrapped in lives that didn’t ache the way his did.

Ivan kept walking. Just wandering. No destination, no purpose. His hands were buried deep in the pockets of his jacket, head low, headphones in. But no music played. He liked the illusion of silence. It made it easier to forget.

There was a cat curled up on a bookstore window. He stopped for a second, watching the way it stretched its body toward a shaft of sun, its fur glinting like burnished copper. For a brief moment, the tightness in his chest eased. He almost smiled.

The wind carried the scent of grilled food from a nearby stall. Someone dropped their drink and two kids laughed too hard about it. A chalk drawing caught his eye, some kid had scrawled a monster on

the pavement in thick blue lines. It looked like the kind Till used to draw. Sharp. Strange. Beautiful.

Ivan exhaled through his nose.

It should have been enough.

These small things. These stupid, mundane things. He told himself they were enough. He tried to believe it.

Because if he didn't—

He would drown.

He stopped at a street corner and leaned against a rusted lamppost, watching the world move. Everyone had somewhere to go. Something to do. Someone to love.

He remembered how people looked at him. How they still did. Like he was untouchable. The perfect image of a dominant Alpha, tall, sharp-jawed, broad-shouldered. Commanding. Charismatic. Everything.

He had everything.

Didn't he?

He was the kind of person people envied. He had the kind of presence that drew eyes. A scent that turned heads. He was everything an

Alpha should be.

And still—

Still.

He felt like nothing.

'I have a feeling you got everything you wanted.'

The lyrics looped in his head, bitter and familiar. *And you're not wasting time stuck here like me.*

'You're just thinking it's a small thing that happened.

The world ended when it happened to me.'

God, he hated himself for this.

Hated that he still cared. That his chest still ached when he saw Till laugh. That his stomach still curled when he remembered the way Till looked at her.

He had told himself it was enough. That being near Till was enough. That loving him quietly, desperately, hopelessly was enough.

But it wasn't.

And admitting that felt like betrayal.

He was still staring at the traffic when he heard her voice.

"Ivan?"

His blood ran cold.

He didn’t move. Not at first. He didn’t have to. Her scent hit him before her presence did.

Sickly sweet.

Suffocating.

Clinging.

Her pheromones wrapped around him like thick syrup laced with rot. It clung to his throat, his lungs, worming its way into his skin like poison. It wasn’t affection, it was a sickness.

He turned slowly.

There she was.

His ex. The Omega.

The one who tried to mark him. The one who clung to him like he was

a cure for her loneliness. The one who had touched him when he couldn’t breathe.

She smiled.

Soft. Pretty. Fake.

"I was hoping I'd run into you," she said, stepping closer. Too close.

Ivan didn’t move.

"I wanted to say sorry," she said, her voice sugar laced, suffocating. "I was drunk. I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t mean to touch you like that."

Her hand reached out, brushing his arm.

He recoiled like she burned.

Every brush of her fingers made his skin crawl. The scent rolling off her was heavier now, deliberately coaxing. Smothering.

It made his stomach twist.

"You forgive me, right?" she said again, stepping closer, her scent blooming with intent. "You still want me, don’t you?"

He wanted to vomit.

She reached for him again, nails grazing his chest.

"I love you, Ivan."

And then—

"**Enough**."

His voice was soft.

Well, that's what he was intending to.

When she looked up, she met his eyes.

And everything in her broke.

His eyes were black, glossy and bottomless, like ink spilled across the whites. His pupils swallowed the light, edged in a furious ring of deep, glowing crimson. Not warm red. Not gentle. But the red of open wounds, of carnage, of fire left unchecked. They weren’t just angry.

They were *ancient*.

Dominant.

Alpha.

She gasped.

The scent exploded from him like a blast wave.

It wasn’t just dominance.

It was annihilation.

Pure Alpha authority drenched in loathing and rejection. A scent that crushed lesser instincts beneath it, that screamed get away so loud it rattled the bones.

The Omega choked on it. Her legs gave out beneath her. She crumpled to her knees, eyes wide with fear, her body convulsing with sobs she couldn’t stop.

"P-please—I didn’t mean—"

Around them, the courtyard fell silent.

Omegas nearby staggered. One collapsed to the ground beside the vending machine, hands over their mouth. Another whimpered as they slid down the wall, hands shaking violently. One student fainted entirely. A few clung to their Betas, sobbing uncontrollably from the sheer weight of it.

Even Alphas—dominant, confident froze where they stood. No one dared breathe too loud.

Ivan stood in the center of it, unmoving.

His presence was *death*.

The Omega on the ground sobbed. Crawled back. Her voice cracked like glass. "I'm sorry. Please, Ivan. I didn’t—I didn't. I—I can’t breathe.

He didn’t answer.

Didn’t blink.

Didn’t even acknowledge her.

He turned.

And walked away.

The weight of his scent lingered in the air like smoke after a battlefield.

And no one followed.

Everyone knew.

It didn’t take long.

By the end of the day, whispers buzzed through every hallway. Ivan’s name passed from mouth to mouth, hushed and urgent, like the story itself might summon him again. Students who hadn’t even been there claimed they had. Those who had watched from the sidelines recounted it over and over, exaggerating the details until the truth was a blur.

They said the Omega collapsed, sobbing, her nails clawing at the pavement like she was being torn apart.

They said three people fainted. That someone cried for nearly an hour afterward.

They said Ivan hadn’t raised his voice, hadn’t even looked angry. That the ground shook when he spoke.

And that somehow made it worse.

Omegas flinched when he passed them in the hallway. Betas gave him space, stepping aside like he carried a plague. Even the other Alphas kept their eyes low, pretending they were too busy to notice him.

It became legend within hours.

He didn’t care about the rumors. He didn’t care that they made him into a myth or a warning or some kind of Alpha god.

But he hated what it meant.

He hated the way people looked at him now—not just with fear, but reverence. Like his cruelty had made him more real, more powerful. He hated the way some Alphas nodded when they passed him, as if he’d done something worth respecting.

He hadn’t wanted this.

He didn’t want to be a symbol. He didn’t want to be terrifying. He didn’t want to have power because of his biology.

He just wanted to be left alone.

He sat outside the art building, knees pulled up, elbows resting on them. The concrete beneath him was warm, the hum of the campus around him carrying on like nothing had happened.

Except everything had.

And even now, his skin still crawled with the ghost of her touch. Like it had sunk into him. Like it might never leave.

His jaw clenched.

He was supposed to be untouchable.

Instead, he was just... contaminated.

A shadow cut across his legs.

“Ivan.”

The voice was gentle, calm, but not afraid. Soft, but grounded. It didn’t tremble or falter. It just existed, like a hand reaching down into water.

He looked up.

Sua stood there, arms crossed, not with defiance, but with quiet confidence. She wasn’t scared of him. Not even close. There was no hesitation in her eyes, no caution.

Just knowing.

She was the kind of Alpha who didn’t need to prove herself.

“Is it true?” she asked.

He stared for a moment before giving a noncommittal shrug.

“She’s still not talking,” Sua continued, voice steady. “Not really, anyway.”

“Good,” Ivan said, flatly.

She tilted her head slightly. “You know, most people would be a little shaken. But you don’t look like someone who lost control.”

“I didn’t.”

“Just give me a flat answer.”

Ivan exhaled slowly, eyes flickering away. “She touched me.”

“Obviously,” Sua’s voice didn’t change. “I also know she confessed again.”

“You know what let's just stop.”

“And then you shattered the atmosphere around you so hard Omegas couldn’t breathe.”

He was silent.

Sua stepped closer and sat beside him.

“You don’t like it, do you?” she asked.

He blinked slowly. “Like what?”

“The power. The way they look at you now.”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t need to.

Sua continued, “They’re scared because it reminded them what a dominant Alpha can be. But you and I both know that’s not who you are.”

“I didn’t mean to make a scene.”

“You didn’t,” she said. “You meant to protect yourself. There’s a difference.”

He didn’t reply, but his throat tightened.

“You should talk to Till.”

His whole body stilled.

She noticed, but didn’t push. “He knows. Everyone knows. But I don’t think he believes what they’re saying.”

Ivan stared at the ground.

“You think I should explain myself?” he muttered.

“I think you want to,” she said simply. “So you should.”

Sua stood up, brushing the back of her jeans off. “You don’t owe anyone an apology, Ivan. But you do deserve to be understood.”

She turned and walked away, the sound of her footsteps soft against the concrete.

Ivan stayed there, unmoving, as the breeze carried the last echoes of her words through the fading heat of the afternoon.

And in the silence that followed, he wondered what Till had heard.

He couldn’t sit still.

After Sua left, Ivan stood up and started walking. He didn’t know where he was going, just that he had to move. He had to find him.

He searched the campus in silence, starting with the places he knew Till frequented. The art building. The back stairwell where he sometimes sketched alone. The music hall, where the sound of piano keys usually slipped out through the cracked door.

Nothing.

Just shadows and fading scents. A single glimpse of gray hair vanishing into a crowd. Maybe it wasn't even him.

Ivan's jaw tensed.

The whispers were louder now. Bolder. No longer whispers, really. Just voices sharpened by boredom and cruelty.

Near the courtyard, he heard it.

A group of guys huddled around the benches, voices thick with mockery. Laughing too loud.

"Man, if I were Ivan, I would've let that Omega chick have me. Did you see her?"

"She was hot as fuck. Begging for it. And what did he do? Humiliated her in front of everyone. Talk about wasted pussy."

"Yeah, seriously. That Alpha's probably broken. All those years of holding it in—he probably snapped."

"You know what I think?" one of them said, snickering. "I think he's always been weirdly obsessed with that Till guy."

"Oh yeah. The Beta? That eyeliner-wearing brat with the nasty attitude?"

“Bet he’s into that. No boobs, no curves, just that sharp mouth and a tight little body. Maybe that’s what gets Ivan off.

Laughter erupted around them.

“You’re telling me he had a whole desperate Omega on her knees and still couldn’t get it up, but he’s trailing after some punk Beta like a dog in heat?"

“He must like it mean and skinny. Real creepy shit.”

“Fuck, maybe Ivan’s a freak after all.”

And that’s when the laughter cut short.

Because Till had arrived.

He stepped into the circle like a thrown blade—fast, direct, all steel. His fists were already clenched, but his smile was almost... amused.

He tilted his head.

“I will fucking dare you,” he said, voice low and lethal. “Say it one more time about him, and I will break your fucking nose.”

The group went quiet for a beat, startled, but not scared.

Then the guy who made the last joke leaned back and grinned. “Oh fuck. You’re his watchdog now?”

He nudged his friend. “Maybe you like it rough too. You a bitch for Alphas now?”

Till laughed.

It wasn’t a real laugh. It was sharp, humorless, a blade dragged along metal.

Then he launched forward and swung.

His fist cracked across the guy’s jaw with a satisfying thud. The guy staggered backward, stunned.

But not down.

“You fucking piece of shit!” the guy shouted, lunging forward and swinging wildly.

He might have connected, he might have landed it—

But the air shifted.

Thick.

Hot.

Sharp like smoke and pine and ash.

Ivan had arrived.

He didn't walk into the space. He entered it, like gravity itself tilted to make room for him.

All that existed was the sound of his boots hitting pavement. One step. Then another.

Every sound around them dropped, no whispers, no laughter, no breath.

His scent rolled out before him like a shadow, cool and composed, but with that unmistakable burn beneath it. The scent of a forest set on fire. Of something wild pretending to be calm.

And his eyes—

Those damn eyes.

Black, bottomless, rimmed with that haunting red, like dying embers pulsing in darkness. He wasn't looking at anyone in particular.

He was watching.

Every muscle in his body was taut beneath his jacket. Not aggressive, not tense. Controlled. Contained.

Barely.

His presence didn't demand attention.

It commanded silence.

The guy who tried to punch Till froze mid-step, caught like prey staring down a predator it hadn't realized was there until it was too late.

Ivan stopped just behind Till.

And said nothing.

Because he didn't have to.

Chapter End Notes

Sua, our angel.

Chapter 11: Thoughts

Chapter Summary

> “I’m telling you,” one said. “It’s underground, yeah, but I know someone who tried it. Says it actually starts to change your body. Like, the hormones, the receptors, all that stuff. You take enough of it, and even an Alpha starts reacting like an Omega.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They stood close, the remnants of tension still coiling between them. Ivan's presence still humming low, steady like a growl at the back of a throat. But Till didn’t move back. Didn’t shrink.

He never had.

And Ivan knew, no matter what anyone said, no matter how loud the rumors got, Till had never looked at him with fear.

Only this.

That sharp, angry care that left him breathless.

Ivan opened his mouth.

His tone was even. Controlled. Not cold, not warm. Just Ivan. The version of him that didn’t bleed when he spoke, but let the weight of it carry between words.

“I didn’t want that scene,” he said, voice low. “Not with her. Not with anyone. But she crossed a line.”

He shifted his stance slightly, gaze focused somewhere past Till’s shoulder. “She touched me. Again. After I told her not to.”

He shrugged, but it was a stiff, calculated motion. “I told her to back off. She didn’t. That’s all there is.”

There wasn’t a crack in his voice. No hesitation. But there was a pause —small, lingering.

“I didn’t mean to scare them like that. I didn’t want… all this,” he gestured vaguely, as if trying to dismiss the weight of the whispers, the looks, the fear clinging to him like dust.

But he didn’t sound apologetic.

He sounded tired.

Then—

“You don’t need to explain.”

Till’s voice broke clean through whatever Ivan might’ve said next.

Ivan's eyes flicked to his.

"I've known you long enough," Till said, his tone flat but steady. "You're not the kind of guy who loses control without reason."

He stepped in, not closer to intimidate or comfort, just to exist at Ivan's side. He didn't speak softly. He didn't coddle. It was just... truth.

"Whatever it was," Till said, "I know it's valid."

And that was the part that got him.

Not the words themselves, but the ease of them. The certainty.

Ivan felt the weight of it hit low in his chest.

Because no one else had said it like that.

No one else had trusted him without needing a version of the story first. Without evidence. Without soft questions or sideways glances.

Till just knew.

Ivan looked at him, really looked. And before he could stop himself, before he could catch the way his throat pulled a little tight—

He almost whined.

Almost like when they were kids and he needed to be believed, needed someone to stand between him and the world.

“Till..” he started.

But Till cut him off, eyes narrowing.

“Don’t get soft on me now, asshole.”

Ivan blinked.

And then—

Just barely—

He smiled.

Not the practiced kind. Not the mask he wore for others. Just the faint tug of his mouth, like his body remembered how to do it from when things used to be simpler.

They stood there, in the aftermath of everything.

The tension still hummed somewhere beneath their skin, but for the

first time since the incident—

It felt like they weren't carrying it alone.

Months passed.

The incident became memory. The whispers faded. The tension that once wrapped around Ivan like a noose loosened until it disappeared entirely.

Life had returned to a strange, gentle kind of normal.

For the first time in what felt like years, Ivan allowed himself to breathe. To laugh. To live.

And the reason was simple.

Till.

They had fallen into a rhythm again. One that reminded Ivan of when they were kids. Back before things got complicated. Back before dominance and hierarchy and heat cycles turned everything into a mess of instinct and expectation.

He no longer avoided Till in crowded spaces. No longer kept his voice measured and his posture unreadable. Now, he was always there, hovering close, annoying him on purpose, leaning on his shoulder during lunch, stealing his snacks, drawing on his notes.

“Ivan,” Till snapped one afternoon, shoving his arm off his shoulder as Ivan rested his chin lazily there, “I swear to god, if you put your sweaty face on me one more time—”

Ivan didn’t even flinch. “You act like you don’t love the attention.”

“I don’t,” Till deadpanned.

Ivan grinned. “Hmn. Liar.”

Till groaned, dragging a hand down his face. “You’re worse now than when we were kids.”

“Ehhh?” Ivan said with a shrug. “I’ve been emotionally repressed for like ten years. You’re my comfort object.

Till punched his arm, harder than necessary.

Ivan laughed and kept leaning on him anyway.

Across the quad, Mizi ran toward them at full speed.

“Ivan!” she called, bright and breathless, her chartreuse eyes glowing. “Ivan, carry me!”

He didn’t even hesitate.

Without a word, he turned around, crouched, and offered his back.

Mizi squealed and leapt onto him, wrapping her arms around his neck. He hooked his arms under her legs and lifted her with ease, standing tall as she giggled.

“You’re the best!” she declared, ruffling his hair.

“You have terrible taste,” Till muttered, watching from the side with crossed arms.

Ivan turned, still holding Mizi piggyback. “Aww. You’re just jealous I don’t carry you.”

Till looked him dead in the eye. “Try it and I’ll stab you.”

“Promises, promises.”

“You two are ridiculous,” Sua called out as she approached from the other path, eyebrow raised and arms folded. She eyed Ivan. “Careful. Don’t throw your back out.”

Mizi stuck her tongue out. “I won’t! Ivan’s strong! He’s the strongest Alpha on campus, you know.”

Sua’s gaze narrowed at Ivan, unimpressed. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Ivan gave a mock salute. “I’ll use my powers for good, Scout’s honor.”

Sua rolled her eyes but said nothing more.

It was dumb. It was loud. It was happy.

And Ivan loved it.

He’d stopped expecting more.

Till was here. They talked every day. They ate lunch together. Ivan got to listen to his rants, got to see him draw, got to sit beside him during music recitals. He had Mizi, and even Sua didn’t seem to hate him anymore. Everything that had felt cold and unreachable had quietly shifted.

He was warm now.

And that warmth filled him so completely, he almost believed he didn’t need anything else.

Almost.

Until he heard the rumor.

He’d been walking past one of the chemistry labs late that afternoon, looking for a vending machine that hadn’t eaten his card the day before, when he overheard it, two 3rd years in lab coats talking

quietly, their backs to him.

“I’m telling you,” one said. “It’s underground, yeah, but I know someone who tried it. Says it actually starts to change your body. Like, the hormones, the receptors—all that stuff. You take enough of it, and even an Alpha starts reacting like an Omega.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“I’m serious. It’s not FDA or any of that. But it’s out there. You just gotta know where to ask.”

Ivan didn’t move.

Didn’t breathe.

Something cold slithered up his spine.

He knew he should walk away.

But instead, he stayed. Listening.

Until the students wandered off, and the silence pressed in on him again..

His hands curled into fists inside his pockets.

He had everything now.

He had Till.

He was happy.

He didn't want to be greedy.

He didn't—

But something inside him, something bitter and twisted and desperate, stirred.

What if...

What if you could be the kind of person Till wanted to protect?

What if you could be small? Soft?

What if you could belong to him in every way you'd ever dreamed?

He shook his head.

Tried to laugh it off.

But the thought stayed.

Chapter End Notes

Chapters way too short. I tried to make everything light, but I promise there will be heavy angst soon, hehe. 2 chapters a day, so proud of myself, ngl. Thank you for reading this far. I will make Ivan suffer even more.

Please leave all your thoughts and suggestions below. Muah!

Chapter 12: Who Are You?

Chapter Summary

A number he didn’t recognize. But the message was clear:

“You still want it?”

The world held its breath.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Laughter buzzed like static in the background.

It was a nice afternoon, sunlight spilling across the campus lawn, students lounging in small clusters, books open, drinks half-finished, jackets shrugged off onto grass. Till had music playing from his phone, something soft and lazy, the kind that slowed your heartbeat and made time feel like it wasn’t real.

Ivan sat beside him, arms loosely draped over his bent knees, head tilted toward the warmth. He didn’t say much. Just nodded along to whatever Till was mumbling about—some dumb professor, an assignment, Mizi’s laugh, maybe. He couldn’t focus.

He was trying.

Trying to be normal.

Trying to feel the sun instead of the burning ache under his ribs. Trying to look at Till and only think about his voice, not his smile. Not her face. Not what it would feel like to be someone else—something else.

He exhaled slowly.

Don’t think about it.

Don’t think about the thing he’d heard last week. The overheard conversation in the alley behind the gym. A guy with shaking hands, slipping a black capsule into another’s palm.

"It makes you different," the guy had said.

Ivan had kept walking.

But he hadn’t stopped listening.

He blinked slowly now, eyes fixed on nothing. The warmth of the sun, the weight of Till beside him, it all faded into a muted haze. His thoughts slipped sideways.

What if it worked?

What if he took it and woke up new?

Not soft like an Omega, not exactly. But changed enough that his body would stop rejecting the scent of comfort. Changed enough that it wouldn’t coil with rage and longing when Till touched someone else.

Till's laughter cut through the fog.

Ivan blinked again. Came back barely to earth.

"Hey." Till's voice was closer now, teasing. "You spacing out again?"

Ivan didn't look at him.

A pause.

"You fail a test or something?"

Ivan forced a laugh. A soft, breathy thing that barely tasted real.

"You know that's impossible, Till." he said, scratching the side of his jaw. "Just tired."

Till raised a brow, clearly not convinced. "You're always tired."

Ivan shrugged. "It's my new brand."

Till snorted. "Right. Mysterious sad boy Alpha. Got it."

Ivan chuckled, but his stomach twisted.

Because it was a brand. A lie he wore like cologne, sharp, bitter, familiar.

He glanced at Till from the corner of his eye.

Sharp jawline. Teal eyes that shimmered in the light like stained glass. Hair curling slightly at the edges from the heat. He was humming now, tapping a pencil against his sketchbook.

He looked peaceful.

And so, so far away.

What if I could be something else?

Something that didn't scare you?

Something that made you pause when you looked at me?

Something you'd protect?

Someone you'd choose?..

The thought was relentless. It sank its teeth in and refused to let go.

Ivan looked back down at the grass. Ran his hand across the blades until his palm stung. His voice was quiet, almost a whisper, lost in the hum of campus noise:

“I’d do i—…”

Till glanced at him.

“Hm?”

Ivan blinked. “Nothing. Just talking to myself.”

Till frowned, but didn’t press.

He couldn’t stop thinking.

What if it worked?

What if there was a version of him that could be held, not feared? Touched, not flinched from? What if Till’s hand could press against his skin and Ivan didn’t have to pretend it didn’t burn?

His phone buzzed.

A message.

A number he didn't recognize. But the message was clear:

[Unknown] : *You still want it?*

The world held its breath.

He didn't reply.

The message stared back at him like it had teeth.

You still want it?

Ivan didn't move.

Not at first.

He just sat there, spine stiff, eyes locked on the glowing screen of his phone like it might bite him. His bedroom was quiet—too quiet. The kind of quiet that made every creak of the walls feel deliberate. The fan overhead groaned once, then stilled.

A chill crawled up his arms.

He hadn't told anyone.
Not a soul.
Not even in passing, not even as a joke.

He hadn’t said a word.

So how the hell—

His fingers twitched. He licked his lips, pulse a steady throb behind his teeth. For a moment, he wondered if it was a mistake. A wrong number. Spam.

But no. The timing. The wording.

It was for him.

The phone buzzed again, screen lighting up like an eye snapping open.

Ivan flinched.

The message remained the same.

[Unknown] : *You still want it?*

Like it already knew the answer.

Like it had been waiting.

He swallowed hard, thumb hovering over the keyboard. Then, slowly, slowly.. he typed:

[Ivan] : *Who are you?*

He stared at the words for a long moment.

Paused.

Deleted them.

Typed again:

[Ivan] : *How did you get this number?*

Sent it.

The three little dots appeared almost instantly.

Typing.

A breath caught in Ivan's chest.

Then the reply came:

[Unknown] : *Doesn't matter.*

A hot flush of anxiety broke across his skin.

Ivan stood abruptly, shoving the chair back. The legs scraped against the wooden floor with a screech. He paced once across the room. Twice. Glanced toward the window. The blinds were drawn, but it didn't feel like enough.

It felt like eyes were on him. Not metaphorical ones.

Watching.

Waiting.

He picked up the phone again, his hands clammy.

Another message appeared.

[Unknown] : *You've been thinking about it. Wondering if it's real.*

His throat closed. He stared.

[Unknown] : *You want it, Ivan.*

His name.

He hadn't told them his name.

He felt it then, low in his stomach.

Fear.

Not the kind that came with a racing heart or the instinct to run. No, this was slower. Thicker. It seeped into his spine, paralyzed his lungs.

Still… still, he typed:

[Ivan] : *How do you know me?*

Dots.

Then:

[Unknown] : *I know what it's like to hate the skin you're in.*

Ivan sat down again, hard.

He couldn't breathe.

Not properly.

He looked around his roo. Blank walls, worn guitar case from Till, a

pile of Till's borrowed hoodies he never returned. Nothing looked out of place. But something was.

He could feel it.

Something inside him had shifted.

Like the air had teeth now.

The phone buzzed again.

[Unknown] : *I know you don't want to be Alpha.*

His fingers moved before he could stop them.

You don't know shit about me.

Send.

Dot. Dot. Dot.

[Ivan] : *Don't I?*

Ivan stared. His thumb hovered. The phone felt heavy.

Then:

[Unknown] : *You wouldn't be shaking if I was wrong.*

His whole body went still.

How—?

How did they know?

The back legs of the seat scraped hard against the wood floor, a raw, dragging sound that sent a jolt through his spine. He crossed the room in three strides and shoved the curtain aside.

The sun was still out, but only just. It hung low over the quad, casting everything in gold that felt too rich, too syrupy. Shadows stretched from the trees like claws.

People were walking. Laughing. Someone was sitting under a tree sketching. A couple leaned into each other, sharing headphones.

Normal.

Ordinary.

But none of them were looking up.

No one was watching him.

Still… his skin prickled. Neck tight. Like eyes were there. Just out of reach.

He typed fast, fingers stiff.

[Ivan] : *Where are you? Don't mess with me.*

Send.

His other hand went to the curtain again, peeking out once more, this time slower. Like prey.

Another message followed, slower this time. Like it was giving him space to crack open.

[Unknown] : *You already know you want it.*
Why pretend you don't?

The words crawled under his skin like worms.

He pressed the back of his hand to his mouth.

He wanted to scream.

Instead, he typed:

[Ivan] : *I'll kill you. I swear to god.*

Three dots.

Then a pause.

Longer this time.

Ivan didn't blink.

Then—

[Unknown] : *I know you won't.*

He stared at that line for too long.

Like it might change.

Like it might offer a way out.

He stepped back from the window. Curtain still open. But now the sun had dipped just enough to paint everything in amber and violet. The shadows on the floor were sharper. His own reflection shimmered faintly in the glass.

He felt exposed.

Open.

Like a *spotlight* was on him.

Buzz.

He flinched.

[Unknown] : *You need me.*

It wasn't a question. Not a tease.

Just truth, delivered like a knife.

Ivan's fingers twitched.

He typed, hard.

[Ivan] : *Fuck off.*

The silence that followed made the walls feel closer.

He could hear his own breathing now.

And then, one last message:

[Unknown] : *I'll be waiting, Ivan.*

He stared.

The screen slowly dimmed.

His reflection returned, framed in fading gold and deepening shadow. A silhouette with wide eyes and a clenched jaw.

The kind of person you couldn't recognize from the outside anymore.

He didn't reply.

Didn't move.

He just stood there, pulse pounding in his ears, the last threads of sunlight crawling across his skin…and felt like the door had opened to something he wouldn't be able to close again.

Chapter End Notes

Ivan, don't trust strangers, I swear to god.
The real question is, who's that guy?

Ehem, hallooo, thank you for waiting. I'll try to make chapter 13 as fast as possible to make Ivan suff-

Chapter 13: Delivery

Chapter Summary

The phone lit up from the desk behind him

"It’s yours."

A second buzz before he could even register the weight of the first.

"Just one step, Ivan."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was something on his bed.

Ivan stood in the doorway, frozen.

The room was quiet, still laced with that fading warmth of late afternoon light, but something was wrong.

He hadn’t left anything there. He remembered exactly what he’d done before stepping out, threw his jacket on the desk, kicked off his shoes, tossed his charger onto the nightstand, peeled back the covers like always.

But now?

Now the bed was too neat. His pillow had been moved, the blanket tugged smooth like someone had smoothed it with both hands. And right at the center, like a centerpiece carefully placed by an unseen hand, sat a small white box.

Plain. Clean. No tape. No seal. No name.

Just… there.

Perfectly positioned.

Deliberate. Intentional.

His heart didn't pound. It stalled. It slowed like prey caught in a snare.

He shut the door quietly behind him. It clicked too loud.

The box didn't move, of course.

But he felt it. *Again.*

Watching.

Waiting.

Each step he took across the room felt like a descent. Like gravity was shifting under him, warping. By the time he stood before it, he wasn't breathing through his chest anymore, only shallowly through his nose.

His fingers hesitated just over the lid.

And then, very carefully, he opened it.

There was black velvet inside.

Soft. Luxurious. Out of place.

And nestled in its folds—

A single pill.

Sleek. Obsidian. Glass-like. Perfect.

It looked… expensive. Designed. Like something made in a lab that didn't follow laws.

Ivan's mouth tasted like static.

He didn't reach for it.

He didn't even blink.

He just stared.

It was beautiful in the ugliest way possible, because it was real.

Because someone had made this moment real. Someone had heard what should never have been said, felt what should never have been known, and brought it into his hands.

It wasn't just a pill.

It was a promise.

It was temptation made visible.

It was him, in pill form.

He staggered back, nearly bumping into his desk.

He caught himself, one palm braced against the edge, the other curling against his stomach where something cold and sharp twisted behind his ribs.

He looked toward the window instinctively.

Curtains drawn.

But the light that came through them had gone strange—thick amber fading to something darker. Sharper. Like the hour had turned without permission.

He pressed a knuckle to his lips.

This couldn't be real.

He was hallucinating. Maybe this was a panic attack. A nightmare. Stress.

Except—no.

It was still there.

The box. The velvet. The pill.

Still gleaming like an open eye.

Buzz.

He jolted.

The phone lit up from the desk behind him.

He picked it up with stiff, cold fingers.

[Unknown] : *It's yours.*

A second buzz before he could even register the weight of the first.

[Unknown] : *Just one step, Ivan.*

He stood in the middle of his room, the floor feeling too soft, like it might give way.

He typed slowly. Carefully.

[Ivan] : *How do I know I can trust you?*

His thumb hovered.

Then he pressed send.

The dots came fast.

Almost too fast.

Like the reply was already waiting for him before he'd asked.

[Unknown] : *Trust isn't the point.*

Buzz.

[Unknown] : *Want is.*

His breath caught in his throat.

He gritted his teeth and responded:

[Ivan] : *I'm not a fool. I'm not going to gamble with my body just because some freak thinks they know me.*

Send.

He stared at the screen.

His hand clenched.

Another message came.

[Unknown] : *This isn't a gamble.*

Buzz.

[Unknown] : *It's an answer.*

Buzz.

[Unknown] : *You've been asking all your life.*

Ivan shut his eyes. Just for a moment.

Then opened them again.

The capsule was still on the bed. Untouched. Undisturbed. But it felt closer now.

He sat down slowly, hands resting on his knees.

He didn't know when he started shaking.

His voice was quiet. "I'm not ready."

He typed:

[Ivan] : *I just want to be okay. I just want peace. I want—*

He stopped himself.

Deleted it.

Retyped:

[Ivan] : *Why me?*

Silence.

For a moment, just silence.

Then—

[Unknown] : *Because you asked for it.*

Buzz.

[Unknown] : *Even when you didn't speak.*

Buzz.

[Unknown] : *Especially then.*

He pushed his phone aside, shoved it halfway under his pillow like it would stop the buzzing.

It didn't.

He stood again. He needed to move. Needed to break the air.

He grabbed the box with both hands and slammed it into the trash bin. The velvet rustled like breath.

He kicked the bin.

Hard.

Paced once.

Against every instinct, he pulled it back out.

Just to look.

He didn't touch the pill. But it gleamed at him.

Waiting.

His phone buzzed again.

He picked it up, biting the inside of his cheek so hard it bled.

[Unknown] : *That was a little dramatic.*

He nearly threw it across the room.

[Ivan] : *Where are you?*

He typed with shaking fingers.

[Ivan] : *How did you get into my room?*

The dots appeared.

Paused

Then:

[Unknown] : *You left the window unlocked.*

His blood ran cold.

He turned, lunged toward the window, yanked the curtain aside.

It was shut. Locked.

But the message hadn’t said "it's unlocked.”

It said: *you left it.*

Past tense.

Like it had already happened.

His chest was tight. His throat burned.

He typed:

[Ivan] : *I'll go to the police.*

I'll have this tested. I'll find out who you are.

Another pause.

Then, two simple replies.

Buzz.

[Unknown] : *Lies. You can't.*

Buzz.

[Unknown] : *You need that.* ^^

He whispered out loud, to the air, "No I don't."

He typed it anyway:

[Ivan] : *I'll find you.*

Send.

Buzz.

[Unknown] : *I'll wait for you.* ^^

He let the phone slide from his hand.

It landed facedown on the blanket beside him, screen dimming slowly until only his reflection remained.

Shadowed. Wide-eyed. Hollow.

He turned toward the trash can again.

The box still sat there.

Open.

Still gleaming like a dark little moon.

And in the silence, Ivan didn't move.

Didn’t speak.

He just sat there—heart dragging slow and uneven behind his ribs—and felt the room fold in around him.

It had been four days, but it hadn’t stopped.

The messages had stopped, yes. The buzzing in the dead hours of the night, the voice without a face. But the silence that followed didn’t bring peace.

It brought pressure.

A waiting that curled around Ivan’s shoulders like a second skin. It lived in the spaces between his footsteps, in the stillness of his dorm room when he shut the door too carefully behind him.

Every minute felt like someone holding their breath behind his back, just outside his peripheral vision.

Nothing had happened since the delivery.

The box was still hidden, the pill still untouched. He had picked it out of the trash, tucked it inside the drawer beneath a heap of receipts and crumpled paper like it was buried, but it was there.

It had weight, even unseen. A presence that made the air inside his room too dense.

Sometimes, when the lights were off, Ivan would lie still and swear he could hear it humming. Not audibly, but under his skin, behind his teeth. Like something alive and waiting.

Because that was what terrified him the most.

He knew this wasn't over.

He knew, deep down in that small, irrational part of his gut that had never once been wrong. That whoever it was, they were waiting for him.

Waiting for him to text first.

Waiting for him to reach out.

To beg.

Or maybe to break.

It wasn't a chase.

It was a trap disguised as stillness.

A predator who didn't need to move anymore, because the prey was already limping in circles.

And Ivan was limping.

He jumped at things he used to ignore.

A knock on the door made his heart spike. The sound of his ringtone sent ice through his bones. The ding of a message, even from Till, made him stop breathing before he could see who it was.

He checked his phone so often he stopped registering how many times. Sometimes it was every few minutes. Sometimes it was every thirty seconds.

When his phone didn't buzz, he picked it up anyway.

When it did, he hesitated before touching the screen.

Because what if it was them?

His hand trembled once as he hovered over the message icon.

That moment, like a hundred others, came and went without reply. No new messages from the number. No more warnings. No more whispering texts.

Just the last words—“I’ll wait for you.”—haunting the empty space of his inbox like a spider that had spun a web and left him to sit in it.

Till had noticed. Of course he had.

Ivan hated it.

And loved him for it.

He could feel his body flinching in real-time, could see the way his shoulders tensed when someone brushed past him, how he kept glancing around like a hunted thing.

He started wearing his hood more. Started sitting in places with his back to the wall. He avoided mirrors unless absolutely necessary.

Even his own reflection made him jump, because it wasn’t always familiar anymore. It was starting to become… other.

But when Ivan was alone, it was worse.

That’s when the thoughts got louder.

He kept his phone beside his bed every night, screen up, ringer on. He stared at it longer than he admitted.

Sometimes he swore he could feel it buzz without buzzing.

Phantom vibrations. Like his body was expecting the message.

Like it was missing it.

He hated that part the most.

That deep, gnawing sense of absence.

The way silence had started to feel like a punishment.

Like he was being tested, left to dangle in a cage of his own hesitation.

It wasn’t just fear anymore.

It was curiosity.

Obsession.

Temptation.

The kind that infected his dreams.

Sometimes he imagined waking up different.

Sometimes he imagined Till seeing him different.

Sometimes, even when he was wide awake, sitting in a class with notes in front of him and people laughing nearby, he'd get this image: Till's hand resting on his arm, gently, like he was something soft. Something delicate. Someone would want.

And every time that daydream ended, Ivan would feel that same twist in his stomach.

Not guilt.

Hunger.

He passed the alley behind the gym three times this week.

Each time, he told himself it was coincidence.

Each time, he walked slower.

Each time, his hand drifted to his phone, thumb trembling over the number he hadn't deleted.

Each time, he didn't press it.

But he stayed longer.

He lingered in shadows he used to avoid.

He looked over his shoulder like someone would finally be standing there.

No one ever was.

But that didn't make the fear go away.

Because Ivan knew, this wasn't about chasing anymore.

It was about whether he'd take the next step.

And he was starting to think… they were right.

Chapter End Notes

Yeyyy, maybe I can do chapter 14 today? Who knows.

Hmm, will he take the pill?.. The author is depressed so Ivan should too.

Chapter 14: A Friend

Chapter Summary

> That word *friend* didn't sound performative from her. It wasn't light, or forced, or said just to be nice. It sounded like a line she'd been holding in her chest for weeks and finally let fall into the air.
>
> Sua. His friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Someone gripped his arm firmly.

Ivan flinched so hard the coffee in his hand jolted sideways, the lid shifting, heat licking the side of his fingers. His head snapped around, ready to lash out, but he stopped short when he saw who it was.

Sua.

Even in boots, she barely reached his shoulder. Ivan towered over her, broad and built, but it didn't matter. Sua never needed height to hold her ground.

There was something about her presence that made you straighten your spine without thinking. She carried weight in silence, in stillness.

She stood with her feet planted, her fingers loosely curled around his sleeve, and tilted her chin up to look him in the face. Her heliotrope-colored eyes cool, sharp, unnervingly clear, locked onto his.

That color always caught him off guard. Violet like crushed glass. Cold, but not empty. Eyes that didn't just look at you, they read you.

And paired with her straight, bob-cut hair, parted just slightly off-center and tucked neatly behind one ear, she looked every bit like the kind of person who saw what others missed. Someone who listened even when you didn't speak.

Just devastatingly honest.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Her voice wasn't angry. It wasn't cold either. Just... direct.

Ivan's mouth opened. He fought for a beat of air and gave her the easiest lie.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Sua's jaw tightened. The ends of her hair swayed slightly as she shifted her weight.

"You know what you're doing."

It wasn't a question. It was said the same way someone says you left the window open or you forgot your bag. Just… observed.

"I didn't do anything," he murmured, lowering his gaze just enough to

pretend he could look away.

She didn't budge.

"You will," Sua said. "And you would."

Then, her voice softened, though not with kindness.

"I hope you won't regret it, Ivan."

He stared at her.

Not because of what she said, but because of how certain she sounded.

How she looked at him like she already knew. Like she'd already seen it all happen and was just trying to give him one last quiet out before the fall.

It wasn't anger in her voice.

It was knowing.

He hated that.

Sua always felt things no one else did.

Maybe it was because she was an Alpha too. Because she understood what it felt like to carry a body full of instinct and war. Maybe that was why she looked at him the way she did, like she'd heard the same whispers in the dark once.

Maybe she had.

Still, like always, Ivan tried to shake it off.

He gave her that crooked, trademark grin. The one with the snaggletooth he never bothered to fix. The one he used like armor.

Sua glanced at it, her mouth twitching, but not into a smile.

"Don't do anything stupid," she said, quiet again. Measured.

Ivan didn't answer.

Because for once, he wasn't sure he could lie convincingly.

She looked up at him again. Her eyes didn't soften, but something in her voice did.

"Whatever you do," she said, "we're here, you know."

She hesitated.

“I’m your friend.”

Ivan blinked.

That word friend didn’t sound performative from her. It wasn’t light, or forced, or said just to be nice. It sounded like a line she’d been holding in her chest for weeks and finally let fall into the air.

Sua. His friend.

He’d never thought about her like that. Not really. Not consciously.

But now?

It mattered.

“I…” he started, but the words didn’t come.

So he nodded instead. Just once.

Sua stared up at him a moment longer, then released his arm. Her hand fell back to her side, her shoulders squared again like she’d just sheathed a blade.

And she walked away without looking back.

Ivan watched her disappear into the crowd, still holding his half-spilled coffee, his heartbeat thudding hard against his ribs.

He stood there a long time, unmoving.

Because somehow, she'd seen it again.

Something that Ivan didn't know he has.

Ivan leaned against Till's side with a lazy grin, stretching like a cat.

The sun was warm. The breeze light. Campus glowed in that golden hour haze that made everything look like a painting.

"Come on, you're ignoring me again," Ivan drawled, nudging Till with his shoulder.

Till rolled his eyes without looking up from his sketchpad. "I'm literally sitting beside you."

"That doesn't count," Ivan huffed, tipping his head dramatically onto Till's shoulder. "You haven't acknowledged my presence in over three minutes. I'm starving for attention."

"You just stole my soda five minutes ago."

Ivan smirked. “It was yours?”

Till clicked his pen pointedly, trying to refocus on his lines.

Ivan leaned in closer, body large and heavy, acting like a clingy oversized blanket. He whined, low and obnoxious. “Tiiilll. Come ooon. Say something sweet to me. I’ve been emotionally deprived all day.”

“You’re emotionally dramatic every day,” Till muttered, but there was a twitch at the corner of his mouth.

Ivan grinned wider, pleased. “Aha! There it is. The fond exasperation. That’s love, right?”

Till scoffed. “In your dreams.”

Ivan blinked, that line catching slightly, in your dreams. But he pushed the thought away.

He draped an arm across Till’s shoulders and sighed like he was tired. “Come on. You love me, deep down. You’ve just buried it somewhere under all that eyeliner and artist angs—”

Till suddenly pushed him.

Not hard. Yet enough to knock the air from Ivan’s lungs.

Enough to make his balance stagger.

Enough to steal the warmth from the moment like someone flipped a switch.

Ivan froze, mid-laugh.

His smile faltered.

His mouth hung open as Till stood up slowly, sketchpad forgotten at his side. His expression had changed.

Not annoyed.

Not embarrassed.

Not even confused.

Just… cold.

Those sharp teal eyes narrowed, and when Till spoke, it didn't even sound like him anymore.

"Who are you?"

Ivan froze, his breath catching in his throat. A crooked, confused smile

tugged at his lips, as if this was just some stupid joke he hadn't caught onto yet.

"Huh?"

Till took a step back, his entire body stiffening, recoiling like Ivan was something vile. His brows pulled together in a scowl, not confusion, no, something uglier. Disgust. Revulsion. His lip curled like he could barely stand the sight of him.

"Don't fuck around with me, bastard."

Ivan's heart thudded, once, hard, painfully loud in his ears. His mouth went dry instantly, a pit forming in his gut.

"So suddenly. It's me, Ivan..." he said, voice cracking with disbelief, hands lifting helplessly, reaching without even realizing it.

But Till stepped even farther away, like Ivan's very existence offended him.

"I don't know any '*Ivan*' in my life."

The ground shifted under Ivan's feet. His body swayed, unsteady, as if the world itself had tilted and he was the only one thrown off balance.

"What… what are you talking about?" Ivan rasped. His throat burned with the effort to hold himself together. "Ivan. Your friend. Your childhood friend."

“Don’t joke like this, Till. It’s not funny anymore.”

Till’s face twisted into something so hateful Ivan could hardly recognize him anymore. His next words were knives plunged deep into Ivan’s chest:

“Don’t fucking touch me.”

Ivan froze mid-step, his hands hovering stupidly in the air, trembling. His entire body felt wrong, like a puppet cut from its strings.

“I don’t know who the hell you think you are, but don’t you dare act familiar with me.”

Ivan opened his mouth, but nothing came out. His heart hammered against his ribs, frantic and sick.

Till’s eyes were merciless—cold and glittering with hate.

“Disgusting Alpha.”

The words hit like a physical blow, knocking the air from Ivan’s lungs. His stomach dropped so violently it was as if the world had opened up underneath him.

Till stepped forward now, not in kindness, but to sneer closer into his face.

“You Alphas think you can do whatever you want, right?” Till spat.

“You think you’re entitled to everything. To me. Is that it? You just want to stick your nasty dick wherever you please.

"Pathetic. You're that desperate to fuck me?"

Ivan’s eyes widened in horror, throat dry and raw. “No, I would never —"

“You act so special," Till laughed under his breath. "But you're just another filthy Alpha thinking the world owes you my ass."

Ivan stumbled back like he’d been slapped. His heart hammered painfully in his ears, drowning out everything else. His mouth opened but no words came out, just choked, broken gasps.

“Stay the fuck away from me. Don’t you dare look at me like that again.”

"You make me sick just by existing."

Ivan’s legs almost gave out beneath him. His mind blanked, short-circuiting, as if it couldn’t process what was happening, why it was happening.

Why?

What did I do?

Why?

The world around him blurred. It was like someone had taken the sun and smeared it into ugly streaks of white across a broken sky. His heart kept lurching painfully against his ribs, desperate to undo this, to wake up from it.

A breath caught in his throat.

Then Till turned.

And walked away.

No hesitation.

Ivan’s body moved before his mind could catch up, driven purely by instinct, by panic, by the crushing, frantic terror of being left behind.

"Till—!" he screamed, voice breaking, legs scrambling clumsily to chase after him.

"Wait, don’t go!"

He ran, heart pounding against his ribs so hard it hurt. His legs felt like jelly, the grass dragging him down with every step, like the entire world wanted to stop him.

The ground seemed endless. Stretching cruelly underneath his feet, too vast, too foreign. Each step he tried to take felt wrong, heavy, like dragging himself through something thick and unrelenting.

"Till! Listen to me!"

He stumbled forward, tears pricking violently behind his eyes but refusing to fall, refusing to give him even that relief.

“Listen to me! Till, stop!”

The air was suffocating, heavy and burning in his lungs. His hands reached out blindly, fingers clawing through the empty air where Till used to be. But he couldn’t catch him. Couldn’t reach him.

His hand reached out in desperate, pathetic hope, but it found only empty air. The distance between them stretched into an eternity.

You make me sick just by existing.

Ivan’s heart broke again, and again, each crack sharper than the last, until it felt like there was nothing left inside him but blood and shame.

He slowed.

The world slowed with him.

Yet still—

“Till!”

The name stumbled off his tongue and broke in half. He tripped, not on the earth, not on his feet, but on his own voice. It strangled itself mid-sound, lodged in his throat like a stone.

His lungs spasmed, seized tight like fists. There was no air, just the thick taste of panic.

And Till never looked back.

The distance grew wider, a chasm he couldn’t cross, no matter how hard he ran.

“Till! Please!” Ivan wailed again, pleading. His voice breaking into something ugly and unrecognizable.

“Till”

“TILL—"

All Ivan could see as the figure walked away was the cold, withering hatred in those teal eyes. Eyes that once softened at his touch, that once held quiet familiarity, now slicing through him like finely honed knives.

Disgust.

Not veiled. Not subtle.

Raw, open, unapologetic disgust.

It carved into his chest, right behind his ribs, a burn that spread like acid down his spine.

It wasn't just rejection. It was erasure.

He felt like something shameful. Like a stain that couldn't be scrubbed out.

Like he was nothing more than an echo, fading out of existence.

Like he had never existed at all.

GASP—

Ivan woke up gasping.

Air scraped down his throat like it had claws. His chest heaved like his lungs couldn't remember how to work.

The room was silent, but everything inside him screamed.

His body was slick with sweat. It clung to him in patches, beneath his collar, down his spine, soaking into the sheets beneath him. His shirt stuck to his skin like he'd just stepped out of a storm. Every breath rattled through his ribs as if he'd been running, drowning, dying.

And for a moment, he wasn't sure he hadn't.

He sat up with a sharp motion, the blanket tangled around his legs. His hand trembled as it rose to his face, brushing fingers beneath his eyes.

Wet.

He blinked slowly, and more tears slipped down.

He was crying.

Not just tearing up, not just misty.

He had been crying in his sleep.

Crying hard enough that the skin under his eyes stung.

Hard enough that his throat still ached with the echo of a choked sob.

Hard enough that he didn't even realize he was whispering—

“No… no… no—”

His voice barely existed. A dry, broken thread fraying at the edges.

It had been a dream.

Just a dream.

A dream.

Dream.

Just—

Just—

He couldn’t even finish the thought. It caught in his throat like thorns, jagged and dry, and refused to let go. He tried again, swallowed it down, but it burned all the way. Like swallowing glass. Like choking on the ashes of something once warm.

He told himself it wasn’t real. Over and over. Like a prayer. Like a curse.

But it had felt real.

Every word Till had said.

Every look.

Every moment of silence filled with so much rejection it was deafening.

He couldn't forget it. It was etched into him, seared into his mind like a brand. The dream replayed, again and again, without mercy. A looping reel behind his eyes. He blinked and it was there. He breathed and it tightened.

The sound of his own voice in the dream made him want to be sick. The way it cracked, the way it pleaded, like a child left in the cold, banging on a locked door.

He had begged.

Begged Till not to walk away.

Begged him to see him.

Begged him to remember who they had been, what they could've been, what Ivan had hoped for in the quietest corners of his heart.

He had reached out, fingers shaking, voice cracking, soul on display. And Till had turned his back.

"You make me sick just by existing."

Two seconds.

That’s all it had taken to shatter him.

Ivan shook, a tremor that started in his hands and took over everything. Like his body couldn’t contain what he was feeling, like it was trying to expel it before it consumed him whole.

He pressed his hands over his face, fingers trembling against his skin, trying to block it out. Trying to stop the words from echoing again and again inside his skull like bullets.

It didn’t work.

They were already buried too deep.

His breath hitched. Then again. Then again. He gasped like he couldn’t breathe through the weight pressing on his chest. The kind of weight that wasn’t physical but still crushed him.

He whispered to himself. Lies.

It wasn’t real.

Till wouldn’t say that.

He wouldn’t look at him that way.

But lies don’t work when your fears are too loud.

And this dream, it hadn’t come from nowhere.

It had been built out of truth.

Out of all the quiet, hidden pieces of Ivan he never let anyone see. Out of the fear he woke up with in the middle of the night. The fear that he was too much. Too needy. Too different. Too wrong.

The fear that he would never be wanted. Not really. Not for who he was.

Because who he was, was something to pity. Something to tolerate.

Never something to love.

He dug his nails into his skin. He didn’t think. He just needed something else to focus on. Something real. Something sharp enough to cut through the noise.

Harder. Deeper.

He welcomed the sting. Welcomed the wet heat that bloomed under his fingers. Blood. Pain. Something real.

But even that wasn't enough.

Even that couldn't drown it out.

The dream had ended.

But the pain had stayed.

Because it had never been just a dream.

It was a mirror.

And what he saw in it was unbearable.

"Alpha shouldn't act like this," he muttered.

The words slipped out without thought, like muscle memory. An echo of something he'd been told, once, twice, a thousand times before. A rule disguised as truth. A commandment whispered into the marrow of his bones since the day he presented.

It felt hollow.

Like a distant voice from another lifetime. Someone else's voice. Someone who hadn't bled like this. Cried like this. Broken like this.

And yet, here he was.

Shaking.

Weeping.

Bleeding.

Still an Alpha.

Wasn't he?

Wasn't he?

He looked down at himself, breath caught halfway between sobs. His arms, smeared with blood. His fingers twitching, raw, restless. His chest rising and falling too fast, like it couldn't decide whether to keep going or stop altogether.

He didn't recognize what he saw.

There was no strength in it. No pride. No control.

Nothing that looked like what they said an Alpha should be.

What he should be.

All he saw was a boy, wrecked and unraveling.

A boy who'd clawed at the edges of love until his hands came away empty.

He was just a mess.

A mess of longing. Of shame. Of bruised hopes and broken pieces stacked together out of habit, out of fear, out of the desperate need to keep going.

This wasn't new.

This was the part of him he lived with every single day.

The part that watched from behind the mask, quiet, patient. Waiting for moments like this to claw its way to the surface.

He kept it buried beneath practiced smiles. Under careless jokes and easy laughter.

But it was always there.

The voice that whispered: *He could love someone. Just not you.*

His breath hitched.

A quiet, pitiful sound. Almost childlike.

The shaking grew worse, spreading from his hands into his chest, his legs, his jaw. He clenched his teeth, but it didn't help. Nothing helped.

He looked at the drawer.

And this time… he moved.

One leg out of the bed. Then the other.

His feet hit the floor like stone. Cold. Heavy. Real.

Each step toward the desk felt like dragging his soul forward. Like walking underwater. Like carrying something that wanted to break his spine.

He didn't turn on the light.

Didn't need to.

He knew.

He had always known where it was.

Knew the way by heart, even if he'd only dared look a few times.

He knelt slowly, knees aching as they hit the floor. Hands trembling so hard he thought the bones might snap.

He reached out. Fingers curled around the drawer handle. Pulled.

It opened with a soft click.

Too soft.

Too gentle.

The sound didn't belong here.

Not in this moment.

Not with what it held.

And there it was.

Nestled in black velvet. Still. Untouched. Waiting.

The capsule. The pill. The drug.

Dark. Sleek. Silent.

It looked smaller than he remembered.

Insignificant.

Harmless.

Deadly.

It stared back at him. Unblinking.

Like a question.

One he didn’t know how to answer.

One he wasn’t sure he wanted to answer.

His hand hovered.

Then dropped.

Fingers closed around the capsule.

It was cold.

So cold.

Smooth like glass.

Light, like it shouldn’t be able to do anything at all.

But it could.

His breathing slowed.

Not because he was calming down.

No—this wasn’t calm.

This was surrender.

The kind that settled heavy in his bones, that dulled the sharpest edges of panic, not by soothing them, but by burying them. A thick, numbing fog crawling through his chest, wrapping around his ribs like

vines.

He stood.

Slowly.

Movements dragging, clumsily wading through water far too deep. The capsule stayed cradled in his hand, fragile and final. It felt weightless, but his limbs felt like stone.

He brought it to his lips.

Hands still trembled, shaking so violently he almost dropped it. But he didn’t.

Because he wasn’t hesitating anymore.

There was no more room for hesitation.

No second guesses.

No last-minute promises or quiet negotiations whispered into the night.

He didn’t say anything.

Didn’t plead with himself to stop.

Didn’t cry.

He was far past tears.

Only silence now.

The kind of silence that comes after a scream so loud it breaks something inside.

He closed his eyes.

And swallowed.

The moment it passed down his throat, he knew.

The room didn’t explode.

It didn’t burn.

It wasn’t some dramatic, violent collapse.

But something inside him shifted.

A click.

A slow, awful turning, like a key sliding into a lock hidden somewhere deep beneath his ribs.

He gasped, barely audible.

Not because it hurt.

But because something had changed.

Something subtle.

Something irreversible.

His throat was dry. His tongue thick. He tasted metal, or maybe it was imagined. Maybe it was just fear, blooming on the back of his tongue like blood.

His body didn't relax.

His panic didn't disappear.

It sharpened, for one brief, blinding second. A spike of clarity. A thought, too fast to hold, *what have I done?*

And then his legs buckled.

Just, gave out.

He staggered backward, hands reaching out instinctively, catching nothing but air. The edge of the bed struck the back of his legs, forcing him to fold over the frame before he slid heavily onto the floor.

His chest heaved violently, each breath coming too fast yet never feeling like enough.

Every desperate inhale caught in his throat, refusing to reach his lungs.

The room lurched around him, slow and unnatural, as though the world itself had begun to tilt. Or perhaps he was the one falling. He stared blankly at the ceiling, dark and empty above him, watching it spin in a slow, endless circle like a sky gathering before a storm.

His vision blurred at the edges, and the sounds around him faded until all that remained was the dull, uneven pounding of his heartbeat.

Even that grew distant, as though it belonged to someone else.

Someone else's body. Someone else's pain.

His fingers twitched once before falling still.

Then everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

Are we still okay? Yeyy.. Long chapter.

I can finally sleep. May I ask something? Ivan is not ooc, right? So does Sua?..

Ps: I edited this chapter. I mean, a lot.

Chapter 15: You're Happy

Chapter Summary

> Maybe something really good had happened, and Till was too much of a paranoid asshole caught up in his own mess to just let him be.

Chapter Notes

> Let's switch the POV to Till.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Buzz—

[Unknown] : *Congratulations*.

The sun was slipping behind the trees, dragging long shadows across the cracked pavement of the campus as Till wandered toward the quad. The air was warm with the dying breath of afternoon, and the smell of cut grass and old brick hung heavy, making everything feel slower somehow.

His phone buzzed lazily in his hand, the screen lighting up with a few muted group chat notifications, nothing important, just the usual stream of half-hearted memes and inside jokes that didn't hit the same lately.

He scrolled half-heartedly, thumbing through them without really seeing, his mind already elsewhere, drifting toward the persistent ache gnawing at the back of his chest.

Dinner. He should figure out dinner.

Maybe they could grab something together.

Hang out like they used to.

Like they still did, technically. But it had felt different lately. The spaces between them filled with something heavier, something he couldn't name.

Conversations that lingered too long in the air, glances that felt too short or too loaded, touches that didn't land right anymore. It was subtle, but it was there. Like trying to walk through water that looked clear but moved wrong.

Till sighed and opened his messages, his thumb hovering over Ivan's name out of instinct more than anything else.

He started typing without really thinking about it:

[Till] : *Yo, wanna grab a bite?*

But before he could hit send, something made him look up—and he stopped, dead in his tracks.

Ivan was standing a few yards ahead, bathed in the bleeding gold of sunset light.

And for just a second, Till forgot how to breathe.

Because Ivan looked… different.

Still Ivan. Still tall, still broad, still standing like the perfect person he was, the perfect man, the perfect alpha without even trying.

He was talking to someone Till didn't recognize and didn't even bother trying to, the details of the stranger blurring around the edges of his vision because all he could focus on was him.

But there was something else now.

Something lighter.

Something brighter.

Ivan's shoulders, always so tense like they were braced for an invisible blow, were relaxed in a way Till hadn't seen in years, maybe ever.

His face, handsome in that rough, effortless way that had always knocked the breath from Till's lungs, was clear. Unguarded. Touched by a small, easy smile that wasn't strained or buried beneath sarcasm or teeth-gritted endurance.

He was wearing a simple white t-shirt, loose enough to drape off his strong frame but snug enough that it clung to the solid lines of him, and dark jeans that fit like they were stitched right against his skin.

His scuffed sneakers tapped lightly against the pavement, the laces slightly frayed. A few silver rings glinted on his fingers when he shifted his hands, nothing fancy, but on Ivan, they caught the light like they were worth a fortune.

Nothing expensive. Nothing flashy.

But Ivan made it look like it was.

The air around him seemed to work harder just to make him glow.

His black hair was pushed back lazily, like he had run his hands through it a few times, leaving stubborn strands to fall forward across his forehead. It softened the sharp, chiseled angles of his face, the fierce slant of his jawline, the proud cut of his cheekbones, into something more real. Something achingly human.

He looked good.

Really, really good.

But more than that—

He looked *happy*.

Truly, deeply, *breathtakingly* happy.

Happier than Till had seen him in a month. Maybe longer. Maybe *ever*.

The sight hit Till in the chest, sharp and sudden. A tangle of relief and something heavier, something darker, something he didn't want to name.

Ivan caught him staring and smiled. No, beamed so bright that Till almost squinted against it.

"Hey, Till!"

Ivan called out, his voice warm, carrying easily over the space between them, touched with a warmth that felt like sunlight breaking through cloud cover.

It landed in Till’s chest like a dropped stone, heavy and immediate.

Till shoved his phone into his pocket quickly, clearing his throat and trying to play it cool, even as his heart tripped over itself.

“Hey. I was about to text you,” he said, his voice thankfully steady, casual, like he hadn't just been absolutely wrecked by the sight of him.

He stepped closer, hands stuffed into the pockets of his oversized black t-shirt, the one with the fraying neckline he refused to get rid of. His fingernails were painted black, as usual, the polish chipped at the thumbs from nervous picking. The hem of his ripped jeans flapped slightly as he walked, one knee entirely shredded open, exposing a pale sliver of skin beneath.

He looked like he always did, like a walking bruise wrapped in black fabric and silver jewelry, but somehow, Ivan looked at him like he was the best thing he’d seen all day. Like he was the sun and the stars and something so much more.

“Wanna grab a bite?”

Till offered, casual, like he hadn't been staring at him like a kicked

dog seconds ago.

He bumped his shoulder lightly against Ivan’s chest, a familiar motion that felt less like a tease and more like a desperate attempt to ground himself.

“I’m starving,” Till added, voice light, pretending nothing inside him had shifted.

Ivan laughed, a bright, warm, whole sound and Till could feel the last scraps of his composure fluttering helplessly.

"Of course," Ivan said, flashing his teeth in a grin that could’ve powered a city.

They started walking, falling into step without even thinking about it, their strides naturally syncing up like the universe had wired them that way. The sun dipped lower, bleeding orange and purple across the sky, painting their shadows long and stitched together.

For a few minutes, they just walked in a comfortable, companionable quiet. But Till kept glancing sideways at him, suspicious despite himself, picking at the edges of the calm like a wound he couldn’t stop touching.

Finally, he gave in.

“Did something good happen?” he asked, injecting as much careless teasing into his tone as he could, like he wasn’t desperate to know.

Ivan's lips tugged into something crooked and mischievous, his eyes sparkling with something Till couldn't quite place.

"Maybe,"

Ivan said, voice dripping with obnoxious mystery.

"What the hell does that even mean?" he grumbled, narrowing his eyes.

Ivan only smiled a wider smug, infuriating and had the audacity to *wink* like he knew exactly what he was doing.

"It's a secret,"

Ivan said, almost sing-song.

Till snorted loudly, rolling his eyes so hard he almost gave himself whiplash.

"Tsk. Secret my ass."

Ivan laughed again.

A full-bodied, genuine laugh that tumbled out of him like it had been caged for years and was finally free.

It wasn’t strained.

It wasn’t forced.

It was beautiful.

Bright and alive, bursting from his chest like a song he didn’t have to smother anymore. It wrapped around Till, threaded through his ribs, tied tight in his throat, leaving him staring again without even realizing it.

Because *God,* he had missed that laugh.

He hadn’t even known how much until he heard it again.

Maybe he was just being dramatic.

Maybe all the suspicion, all the worry he’d been clutching like a second skin around Ivan lately, was useless after all.

Maybe Ivan was just…happy.

Maybe something really good had happened, and Till was too much of a paranoid asshole caught up in his own mess to just let him be.

Ivan deserved to be happy.

More than anyone.

Till repeated it in his head like a prayer, like an apology he couldn't say out loud.

And still—

Something gnawed at the back of his mind.

A whisper.

A crack.

A tiny, splintered thought he couldn't drown out, no matter how hard he tried.

Something had changed.

Something deep.

Something not written across Ivan's face, not scrawled on his skin where Till could read it.

Something hidden.

Something felt..

Like Ivan was standing right next to him, laughing, smiling, teasing,

warm and still somehow standing just out of reach.

Again.

Chapter End Notes

The calm before the storm.

Shifting the perspective to Till. Heh, I tried to make it wholesome and fluffy but then I realized, I don't know how. So, halloooo, it's been a while.

Next chapter, something bug might happen. Thank you for supporting this fic!

Chapter 16: Aren't You Sweet?

Chapter Summary

> It scared the absolute hell out of Till, how easily Ivan could shift, could change little pieces of himself, and still be so utterly, unmistakably *Ivan*.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The walk to the food court was easy and mindlessly familiar after so many times.

Their steps scuffed against the concrete in a lazy, unhurried rhythm. The sun hung low, casting long shadows across the path, and the air was heavy with the scent of fried food and coffee drifting from nearby kiosks.

Even in the easy comfort between them, Till noticed it—the little things.

Things that should've been harmless. Should've been forgettable.

Things he couldn't stop seeing anyway.

At the vending machine, Ivan slowed, thick brows knitting together in concentration as he stared down at the bright rows of snacks.

Till leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms loosely, expecting the usual scene to play out, Ivan grumbling about how everything tasted fake and chemical, picking reluctantly at a packet of plain nuts or jerky if he picked anything at all.

But today, Ivan just stood there, tapping his knuckle lightly against the glass, considering the garish display of colorful candies and cookies like it was a serious decision.

"Which one’s good, you think?" Ivan asked, glancing sideways at Till, voice casual.

Till blinked, caught off guard.

"You’re asking me?" he said, incredulous. "You hate sweets, remember?"

Ivan huffed a low, amused sound, the kind that vibrated from deep in his chest and made Till’s stomach do something it shouldn’t.

"Used to," Ivan said, shrugging almost carelessly. "Kinda... started liking 'em lately."

Then, without any apparent hesitation, he pressed the button for a packet of neon pink strawberry marshmallows.

The bag clattered into the tray below, and Ivan bent down, catching it in one smooth flick of his wrist, like he’d done it a hundred times before.

Till stared.

'Strawberry marshmallows.'

Ivan tore the bag open with his teeth, shaking out one of the fluffy, pastel candies into his palm.

He tossed it into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully, the sticky-sweet smell of artificial strawberry already filling the air around him.

And then he smiled.

A small, almost childlike smile.

It tugged at the corners of his mouth, made his eyes crinkle faintly at the edges, the kind of unguarded, easy happiness Till hadn’t seen in a long, long time.

Till swallowed against the dry tightness creeping up his throat.

Because Ivan had hated sweets.

Had ranted about how they tasted like chemicals, had wrinkled his nose every time Till so much as offered a candy bar.

But now—

Now he was eating pink marshmallows like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Like he'd always loved them.

Like it wasn't a big deal at all.

Till told himself it didn't mean anything.

People changed.

Tastes changed.

That's what growing up was. It wasn't something he should read into.

And yet.

The thought stuck stubbornly inside his chest, a sharp, itching burr he couldn't shake loose.

They found a seat by the windows, sprawling into the worn plastic chairs like they owned the place, like they had a hundred times before.

Ivan slouched low, long legs stretched out shamelessly under the table, looking utterly at ease.

He tore open another snack bag, this one with cartoon bunnies printed across the crinkly plastic, tiny chocolate cakes, individually wrapped.

Till watched as Ivan struggled briefly with the fiddly wrapper, nails scratching at the edges until he managed to peel it open, revealing a miniature cake that looked almost absurdly small in his large hands.

Ivan didn’t hesitate. He popped it into his mouth whole, chewing with a pleased little noise that made something inside Till clench.

Then Ivan licked a smear of chocolate from the pad of his thumb, casual, unconcerned.

Another thing.

Another tiny thing Till couldn’t stop noticing.

He tried to tear his eyes away, tried to pretend the tightness in his chest was just from sitting weirdly, not from the sight of Ivan smiling to himself over something as simple and stupid as a chocolate snack.

Tried not to think about how Ivan’s grin looked different lately, softer somehow. Less guarded.

Tried not to think about how Ivan kept doing things—small things, that didn’t fit neatly into the version of him Till had carried around in his head for years.

Things like trying sweets.

Things like pausing to look at cheap keychains in shop windows, his fingers brushing over tiny plush animals with a strange kind of absent fondness.

Things like liking cute things without irony, without that layer of sarcasm Till had always relied on to feel safe.

Till gritted his teeth and told himself again, that he was overthinking.

That it didn't matter.

That people were allowed to change. Allowed to like different things.

It didn't mean anything.

And yet the thought kept gnawing at the edges of his mind:

Was he… changing?

For someone else?

They finished eating, brushing crumbs off their clothes, and wandered out toward the little row of pop-up shops along the quad, letting their feet carry them wherever.

The late afternoon light spilled golden across the pavement, and the shops buzzed quietly with the lazy energy of people killing time.

A pop-up stand caught Ivan's attention, some cheap, cluttered place selling phone charms, keychains, hair clips, rings.

Stuff Till usually barely glanced at, except maybe to make a passing joke about.

Ivan stopped.

Without hesitation.

He reached for something—

A black headband with floppy bunny ears stitched onto it, soft and velvety.

The kind of thing Till would've bet money Ivan would normally have scoffed at, maybe even called dumb out loud.

Instead, Ivan turned toward him, slipping the headband onto his own head in one smooth, unselfconscious motion.

The black ears flopped forward awkwardly, one bent over his forehead, the other tilting sideways.

It looked ridiculous.

Completely, utterly ridiculous.

It didn't suit him at all.

It was too cutesy, too delicate for someone like Ivan—broad-shouldered, sharp-eyed, all rough edges and strength.

But—

For some reason Till couldn’t quite name, it was still cut—

Huh?

What the fuck.

No. No, no.

He wasn’t going to think that word.

Not about Ivan.

Not about this.

Maybe it was just because Ivan looked so fucking happy.

He beamed at Till, grinning wide and proud, his deep voice rumbling warm and low as he said,

"Till, look. Isn’t this cute?"

Till blinked.

His brain short-circuited for a second.

Ivan stood there, bunny ears flopping forward, wearing his usual, rough around the edges, and somehow looking soft.

Warm.

Like a version of himself Till had never seen before.

Like a version he wasn't sure he deserved to know.

He stuffed his hands deeper into his pockets, trying to ground himself in the familiar bite of denim against his fingers.

He forced a casual scoff.

"You look like a menace," he said, voice scraping a little too rough.

Ivan just chuckled, unbothered, reaching up to flick one of the floppy bunny ears with his finger, making it bounce absurdly.

Till couldn't help it, a smile tugged stubbornly at the corner of his mouth, no matter how hard he tried to hold it back.

Because yeah.

It was ridiculous.

It didn't match him.

It shouldn't have been cute.

And yet.

And yet..

It was.

And it scared the absolute hell out of Till, how easily Ivan could shift, could change little pieces of himself, and still be so utterly, unmistakably *Ivan*.

Still be the boy who had laughed with him when they were kids.

Still be the man who had grown sharper, quieter, over the years.

Still be the person he—

Till yanked his gaze away, clearing his throat roughly, heart pounding in his ears.

"Whatever, man," he said, shaking his head like it didn't matter. "You do you."

Ivan just chuckled again, low and easy, adjusting the headband with a careless touch like he wore it every day.

And Till followed him as he turned to browse more of the stand, desperately pretending, that he didn't feel the ground shifting beneath his feet.

Pretending he didn't feel like maybe—just maybe—he was already losing a version of Ivan he hadn't even realized he was holding onto.

Somehow, after that day with the bunny ears, it became a habit.

Ivan's new, brighter version of himself, loud, reckless, unfiltered stitched itself into the fabric of their lives with alarming ease.

It was stupid.

Maybe Till knew that deep down. Maybe he knew how flimsy it all was.

But he let it happen anyway.

Most afternoons after class, they ended up wandering the campus quads, drifting past the little booths and cheap pop-up stands that lined the walkways.

Ivan would tug Till along by the sleeve, dragging them through rows of cluttered stalls with the wide-eyed excitement of a kid let loose in a candy store.

Every day, it was something new.

"Till, Tilly—look!"

Ivan grinning, breathless, waving a pair of glittery keychains in both

hands, one shaped like a frog wearing a crooked crown, the other a blushing strawberry.

He practically shoved them into Till's face, eyes crinkled from smiling too hard.

"Which one's cuter? No, wait, don't even answer. It's the frog. Obviously. Right?? Adorable, righttttt?"

Till groaned, grabbing the frog without thinking.

"You're so embarrassing, I don't know you," he muttered, but the words caught on a laugh that refused to be smothered.

Ivan's laughter burst out, unguarded and bright, filling the chilly afternoon air.

Before Till could blink, Ivan clipped the stupid plush onto his backpack, the little frog swinging absurdly with every step they took.

Later, Ivan bought them matching stickers, fat cartoon cats jammed into tiny teacups and made Till swear he'd actually use his.

"I'm putting mine on my laptop, bro. Brotherhood. Loyalty. Sticker pact"

Ivan had said, mock-serious, jabbing a finger at him.

"Don't fucking bro me," Till deadpanned, but his voice came out softer

than it should've.

Sometimes, when they sat sprawled on the grassy lawn eating lunch, Ivan would pull random crap from his bag—pink highlighters, a rubber duck keychain, a polka-dotted phone case, and thrust them at Till with a grin too big for his face.

"Be honest," he'd say, deadpan. "I could totally rock this, right? Peak fashion."

"You look like a five-year-old who lost his mom in a grocery store," Till would shoot back, dry as bone.

"Hell yeah."

Ivan would howl with laughter, doubling over until he nearly spilled his drink, tears stinging the corners of his eyes.

And Till—

Till would watch him.

Would watch the way sunlight threaded through his hair, caught on the tiny glint of metal at his ear.

Would watch the way he grinned until it looked like it hurt.

Would watch, and tell himself:

This is good. He's happy. I should be happy too.

Even when sometimes Ivan's laughter faded too fast.

Even when sometimes, if Till caught him in the right light, he could see it, how thin his wrists were getting, how the skin under his eyes stayed shadowed no matter how long he slept.

Even when sometimes, between one heartbeat and the next, Ivan's whole expression would blank out, like a switch flipping, leaving behind someone Till didn't quite recognize.

He swallowed it down.

Forced himself not to ask.

Not to ruin it.

Because every time he even so much as said Ivan's name—

Every time he reached out, said, "Hey, you good?" or "C'mon, idiot, cheer up."

Ivan would look up.

And the change—

The change was instant.

Not just a smile. Not just a laugh.

But a beam.

A blinding, aching, too-bright beam that made something in Till's chest clench painfully tight.

Like sunlight breaking through heavy cloud cover.

Like Till's voice alone was enough to drag Ivan back from whatever dark place he kept slipping toward.

Ivan's whole body would seem to lighten, shoulders lifting, eyes shining, mouth pulling wide into that fierce, boyish grin peeking with his snaggletooth that Till had known for years and years and years.

And he..

Till would bite down hard on all the words crowding his throat.

Because if he asked...

If he pulled too hard at the fragile seams Ivan was trying so desperately to stitch together..

If he forced him to look at the hollowed-out parts he was so carefully hiding…

Maybe that light would vanish for good.

Maybe Till would lose him.

And Till—

Till was selfish enough to want him alive more than he wanted him honest.

So he stayed silent.

Smiled when he was supposed to smile.

Laughed when Ivan shoved stupid stickers into his hands.

Let him clip stupid frogs to his backpack and scatter candy wrappers across the grass and slip on slap bracelets with a triumphant grin like he'd just discovered fire.

He let it happen.

Because Ivan was trying so hard.

Trying to be okay.

Trying to find something bright enough to outrun the dark.

And Till wasn't brave enough and wasn't cruel enough to take that away.

Not when Ivan was finally, finally smiling again.

Not when he still, somehow, kept turning toward Till—

like Till was something worth reaching for.

That day started like any other.

Ivan had class in the morning, some group presentation he'd grumbled about half-heartedly and they'd planned to meet up for lunch after.

Till lounged outside on one of the stone benches near the quad, halfheartedly picking at a packet of vending machine pretzels, thumbing through his phone without really seeing the screen.

The spring air was cool and clean, the sky overhead a soft, washed-out blue, lazily painted with streaks of cloud.

Around him, the campus moved at its usual sleepy pace—students in loose clusters, laughing, chattering, phones buzzing with low hums of

life.
Background noise. Ordinary. Harmless.

Till checked the time.

Ivan should’ve been done by now.

He shoved his phone into his pocket, stretching a little, starting to stand, ready to head toward their usual meeting spot near the food trucks.

That was when he heard it.

At first, it barely registered, a few voices, casual, floating past him.

"Crazy, right? That famous alpha collapsed in Room C during their presentation—"

The words snagged something deep inside him, sharp and cold.

He turned slightly, frowning, heart giving an uneasy kick.

Nearby, a pair of students rushed past, still talking too loud.

"Yeah, they said he just dropped. Like mid-speech. Straight up fainted."

"Who was it?"

"You know, the alpha from the law program—"

The air around Till seemed to thin, the noises of campus distorting, going muffled, distant.

The alpha from the law program.

Ivan.

Something inside him lurched, sick and certain.

He was moving before he even made a decision, shoving off the bench hard enough that it scraped against the pavement.

More voices spilled around him now, faster, sharper, urgent in a way that made his stomach twist.

At the message board, a small crowd had gathered, their phones lighting up with new posts, fresh panic threading through their words.

Room C. Alpha collapse. Emergency.

Till's hands curled into fists at his sides, nails biting into his palms.

And then—
clear as a knife to the gut—
he heard it.

"Iva—"

The voice got swallowed by the noise, but it didn’t matter.
He didn’t need the rest.
He didn’t need to hear it all to know.

The world narrowed to a single, blinding point of terror.

He ran.

No hesitation.
No plan.

Just *ran*.

Feet slamming against the pavement, heart pounding so loud it drowned out everything else.

Dodging students, ignoring the startled looks, the shouts of "Hey, watch it!" that barely grazed his consciousness.

His whole body screamed forward, faster, faster, like he could outrun the fear clawing up his throat, like he could undo it if he just moved quickly enough.

"Ivan—Ivan—Ivan,"
his mind chanted with every hammering step,
a desperate prayer, a plea, a command.

The quad blurred past him, the fountain where Ivan had once slipped and nearly dragged Till down with him, the food truck they always complained about but kept going back to, the benches they'd sprawled across on lazy afternoons.

Memories ripped past him, bright and vicious.

None of them mattered now.

Only one thing mattered.

Only *him*.

He sprinted past the last row of buildings, Room C just ahead, the crowd thickening, voices louder, sharper
and Till's chest was burning, his legs screaming, but none of it registered.

Only the icy certainty blooming in his gut did.

Something was wrong.

Terribly, awfully, irreversibly wrong.

And the sickest part, the part that made his whole body feel like it might break under the weight of it was that he'd known.

He had known.

He had seen it, day after day, behind Ivan's too-bright smiles and stupid glitter keychains and slap bracelets and the way he lit up like he was trying to burn himself alive just to stay warm.

He had known.

And still—
still he hadn't said anything.

He had let it happen.

And now—
now he might be too late.

Till pushed harder, shoved through the last knot of onlookers gathered near the doors, his voice finally ripping free of his throat, hoarse and raw:

"Ivan—!"

Chapter End Notes

What happened to Ivan?!! RUN FASTER! FASTER! FASTER! GO TILL, I'M ROOTING FOR YOU!!!! 💥💥

I'm still surprised y'all are still reading my bullshit.

Chapter 17: He'll Live

Chapter Summary

> “I’m Luka,” he said, and he offered Till a handkerchief. “He’ll live. Just breathe slowly and calm down.”

Chapter Notes

> Take care of yourselves, everyone. Don't be like Till and Ivan. Breathe in and out. Yeyyy, way to go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The door slammed open with a deafening bang, the sound cracking through the air like thunder, jarring everyone inside the room. Till’s heart dropped. It wasn’t just panic, it was dread, molten and suffocating, gripping every nerve in his body the second his eyes landed on the scene before him.

Chaos.

Voices blurred into meaningless static. People surrounded something —someone—and it took him a heartbeat too long to realize that it was Ivan lying crumpled on the floor.

His skin was too pale, ashen, like the life had been drained out of him. His shirt was wrinkled, and there was a thin, dark smear on the side of his lips, blood? no—please no—

“Ivan!” Till’s voice tore out of his throat, raw and cracked, a mix of disbelief and terror.

Without thinking, he shoved his way through the crowd. Arms hit his sides, bodies resisted, but he didn’t care, he couldn’t care.

“What the hell are you doing just standing there?!” he screamed, his voice trembling and furious.

“Call an ambulance! Fucking move—**MOVE!** You’ll suffocate him!”

His knees hit the floor with a painful thud, but he didn’t even register it. Ivan was lying there, still, chest barely rising, eyes half-closed, glazed, as if he wasn’t really there.

Till’s hands trembled as he reached out. He pressed two fingers to Ivan’s neck. His skin was cold.

Where’s your pulse? Come on, Ivan. Come on...

A weak thump. Then another.

“He’s still breathing,” Till whispered, almost to himself, then louder, hysterical, “Where's the fucking ambulance!”

His hands hovered helplessly, then pressed over Ivan’s chest, his head dropping to listen.

Heartbeat. There—faint.

So fucking faint.

“Don’t you fucking die on me!” his voice cracked as he gritted his teeth, almost sobbing.

A soft, calm voice broke through the chaos like a thin blade of ice through fire.

“I already did,” the boy said. “The ambulance is on its way. Yelling won’t solve anything.”

Till whipped his head up, teeth clenched, ready to tear whoever spoke into shreds.

A boy stood among the mess, untouched by it somehow. He was shorter than Till, but it didn’t make him seem smaller. His presence was striking, he looked like he’d stepped out of a painting. Pale blond hair that glimmered under the fluorescent lights, falling slightly into his eyes, which were the same hue, pure gold, like sunlight filtered through antique glass. His expression was serene, but not indifferent, more like composed. Almost princely.

Everything about him was delicate, from the way he clasped his hands behind his back to the slight tilt of his head, as though considering a complicated painting in a museum rather than the near-death of a classmate.

“And you,” he added, voice like silk, “you’re sweating a lot. Try to breathe, or you’ll pass out too.”

Till blinked at him, confusion and adrenaline crashing together, his chest still heaving.

“What—?”

“Breathe.” The boy repeated it gently. “In. Out.”

That’s when Till realized he’d been holding his breath. He sucked in a gasp so harsh it burned his lungs. His body shook from the effort of just existing in that moment.

The silence between the sirens was unbearable.

Then they arrived, red lights flashing through the windows, a shrill wail splitting the air. The room surged again, but Till didn’t move. Not when the medics entered, not when they started asking questions, not when they kneeled beside Ivan.

He just held Ivan’s hand.

His knuckles turned white around the pale fingers. Ivan’s skin was still cold, still unresponsive.

“I’m coming with him,” Till said hoarsely, voice breaking. He was shaking so badly he could barely stand, but he didn’t let go until a medic gently pried their hands apart.

He watched helplessly as they lifted Ivan onto a stretcher, oxygen mask strapped over his face, IVs already being prepped. The medic nodded, Till could ride with them. He stumbled toward the ambulance like he was in a dream, chest aching from a panic that hadn’t ebbed even slightly.

Just before he stepped in, the blond boy appeared beside him again. The same graceful posture, the same unshaken calm. Even standing there, amongst chaos, he looked like he belonged somewhere gentler,

like a noble from a forgotten world, untouched by blood and panic.

“I’m Luka,” he said, and he offered Till a handkerchief. “He’ll live. Just breathe slowly and calm down.”

Till didn’t take the cloth. He was still shaking. Still clutching onto the afterimage of Ivan on the floor.

“Till,” he whispered. “My name’s Till.”

“Good,” Luka said, like it mattered. “He’ll want to know who held his hand.”

And then the doors closed. The sirens screamed again.

And Till, curled in the corner of the ambulance, held onto Ivan’s hand like a lifeline, like if he let go, everything he knew would disappear. He never took his eyes off him. Not once. Not even when his vision blurred from tears.

The world floated in and out like a bad dream.

There was no sense of time, only drifting sensations that faded in and out like radio static. First came the sounds: the rhythmic, clinical *beep… beep… beep* of a heart monitor.

The soft hum of fluorescent lights overhead; the muted, hurried

footsteps of nurses just outside the door. They grounded him, tethered him back to a body that felt like it no longer belonged to him.

Then came the pain.

A sharp, deep bolt tore through his chest the moment he shifted, so visceral it knocked the breath from his lungs. He groaned, eyes squeezing shut. His entire body felt like it had been hollowed out and filled with glass—*fragile, thin, ready to shatter at any moment*.

Ivan lay still, panting lightly, afraid that even breathing wrong would split him apart.

And then—

A warmth. A gentle pressure around his hand.

Alive warmth.

Ivan blinked blearily, trying to orient himself. The ceiling above was too white, painfully sterile. The lights were bright, overbearing, almost cruel. He squinted against them, disoriented.

A shape began to form at the edge of his vision. Slumped, unmoving, hair wild and clothes rumpled, like he'd been dragged through a storm.

Till.

Sitting in a rigid plastic hospital chair, head bowed, eyes closed in an exhausted half-sleep, and still clutching Ivan's hand like it was the last thing anchoring him to earth.

His thumb twitched when Ivan moved. A small squeeze followed, like a reflex.

Ivan tried to sit up, but the sharp spike of pain through his chest made him gasp aloud and collapse back against the pillows, teeth grit against the white hot sting.

That sound must have jolted Till awake.

His head snapped up, bloodshot eyes flying open. The moment he saw Ivan's face, something inside him seemed to break.

"Ivan," he breathed. Just the name, hoarse, disbelieving, *devastated.*

Till was on his feet in an instant, leaning over him with trembling hands, one pressing lightly to Ivan's shoulder to keep him from moving. His voice, when it came, was rough, shaking.

"Don't move. Not even a fucking inch, okay?"

He swallowed, and Ivan saw the way his throat bobbed, tight with panic still not shaken off.

“You need to rest. Just stay still.”

Ivan blinked up at him, dazed and dry-mouthed. “I…” He licked cracked lips, wincing. “I fainted?”

Till’s face crumpled at the word, a crack in his already fractured mask. Just for a second. Pain, guilt, and something else, something deeper and more vulnerable, flashed across his face before he forced it down.

“Yeah,” Till said, quieter now. “You fainted. You scared the shit out of everyone.”

Ivan turned his head slightly, taking in the room: IV hooked into his arm, wires tracking his heart, a dull ache behind his eyes that pulsed in time with the machines. But all he really saw was *Till.*

Messy-haired, dark circles etched under his eyes like bruises, his shirt wrinkled and stained with something that looked like coffee or maybe even blood. He looked wrecked.

“I’m sorry…” Ivan murmured, voice hoarse. His chest tightened, pain and guilt mingling until it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began.

“You were there… weren’t you?”

Till huffed a breath, half a sob, half a laugh—as he slumped back into the chair beside the bed, never once letting go of Ivan’s hand.

“Of course I was,” he said, fierce and unyielding. “You think I’d let you die like that?”

Ivan blinked. Something inside him flickered at that tone—like a dying candle desperate to burn again.

“I remember… voices. Yours.” He squinted. “You were yelling.”

“Damn right I was yelling,” Till muttered, but his grip tightened.

“I practically tore the building apart screaming for an ambulance. No one was moving. Like they were watching a fucking tragedy play out on stage.”

His voice cracked. “So I screamed until someone *did* something.”

Ivan stared at him. The image of Till, loud, furious, *terrified, s*hattered something quiet and aching inside his chest.

“You were crying?” Ivan asked softly.

Till’s eyes widened. “Huh?”

“You cried,” Ivan repeated, a little more clearly. “Didn’t you?”

There was a pause.

And then, with the most indignant scowl Ivan had ever seen, Till sat up straighter and scoffed.

“I did not,” he said flatly.

Ivan arched a brow. “You sound like you did.”

“*Men don’t cry*,” Till shot back, voice pitched with defensive sarcasm. “You bastard.”

Ivan couldn’t help it, he laughed.

Or tried to.

It came out a weak, pained wheeze that made his ribs scream and his eyes water, but it was real. The first real sound he’d made since waking.

Till reached out instantly, his other hand brushing gently at Ivan’s arm as if afraid even touch would hurt him.

“Easy. Don’t laugh, dumbass. You’ll pull something.”

Ivan grinned faintly despite the pain. “Still calling me names, huh?”

“Of course,” Till murmured, brushing his thumb over Ivan’s knuckles again, so gently it hurt more than anything else.

They fell into a heavy silence. The kind that was felt, not just heard. A silence made of everything unsaid and everything too painful to name.

Ivan’s gaze drifted toward the ceiling again.

“I'm sorry,” he said once more, quieter now. “For... everything. For making you go through that.”

Till shook his head sharply.

“Don’t. Don’t say that.”

“But—”

“No, Ivan,” Till cut in, voice firm and raw. “You don’t get to say sorry for scaring me. You just… get better. You get through this. That’s all you have to do.”

There was something desperate in his voice again. Something Ivan didn’t dare name.

Till leaned closer, forehead nearly touching his.

“You scared the hell out of me,” he whispered, barely audible. “Don’t do that again. Please.”

Ivan's throat tightened. He squeezed Till's hand back—weakly, but it was all he could manage.

"I'll… try."

Till let out a shaky breath, half laugh, half sob, and sat back just enough to look him in the face again. He wiped at his eyes with the back of his sleeve, clearly trying to pass it off like nothing.

"You better fucking try," he muttered. "You still owe me coffee, asshole."

Ivan smiled again. The muscles in his face ached, but it was worth it.

"Sure," he rasped.

The silence stretched between them like a razor-thin wire, vibrating with tension.

Ivan could now feel Till watching him, not casually, not idly, but intensely, like he was trying to see beneath his skin. The pressure of that gaze made Ivan's chest tighten even more than the tubes and bandages already did. His lungs felt too small. His body too heavy.

He hated when Till looked at him like that.

Like he saw him.

Like he was about to ask the one question Ivan couldn't answer.

"It's just stress… right?"

Till's voice was soft, too soft. Not the loud, brash Till Ivan was used to. It trembled around the edges, betraying how scared he still was. It wasn't just a question. It was a lifeline, an invitation: *Tell me the truth. Let me help.*

Ivan stared at the ceiling, too white, too sterile and felt that invitation hanging in the air like something sacred and terrifying.

He could tell the truth. He *could.*

But if he did…

If he said it, said the words about the pills, the pain, the way his body had been tearing itself apart from the inside out just for the dream of being enough, then what?

Would Till look at him like that again? With those eyes like a storm brewing, all cracked glass and quiet fury and heartbreak?

Would he leave?

Would he finally stop seeing Ivan as someone worth his time?

Ivan couldn't bear that thought. He couldn't stand the idea of Till

looking at him the way he looked at broken things.

So he answered.

"…Yeah."

A lie tasted bitter in his mouth.

But he said it anyway.

He felt it leave his mouth and wanted to reach out and crush it before Till heard, but it was too late.

Till didn't respond.

But Ivan could feel his eyes on him. Heavy. Scalding. So loud in their silence that it made Ivan's whole body tense.

When he finally dared to turn his head, he flinched.

Till wasn't angry.

He just… looked *hurt*.

His eyes were shining, darkened by a quiet kind of betrayal. Not the dramatic kind. The worse kind. The kind that came from knowing

someone was still lying to you, even after everything.

Why do you always lie? Till's eyes asked.

Ivan looked away immediately.

He couldn't hold that gaze. Not when he already felt like a cracked shell, empty inside and useless, taking up space and air and concern he didn't deserve.

"I'll call the doctor," Till said, the words thin and professional now, like he was retreating behind a wall. "Call me if you need anything."

He moved to stand, to let go of Ivan's hand.

But the moment their fingers began to part, Ivan panicked.

He clung.

Weakly. Pathetically. Like a child afraid of the dark.

"Stay," he whispered, the word clawing its way out of his throat like it hurt to speak it.

Till froze.

Ivan didn't dare look at him, but he couldn't let go. His hand trembled in Till's, holding on as tight as his battered body would allow.

"Just… for a moment," he breathed. "Please."

There was a beat of stillness.

Then Till slowly sat back down.

He didn't say anything at first. Just adjusted his grip, laced their fingers tighter. Like a promise.

"…Okay," he whispered finally, voice hoarse.

Ivan turned his face away from him again, hiding behind the oxygen tubes and the ache in his chest.

He wished he was stronger. Braver. Worthy.

He wished Till would stop looking at him like he mattered.

But right now, with Till's fingers in his, warm and steady, he could pretend, just for this moment, that he was.

It had been a week.

Seven days of dull hospital walls, tasteless food, and silence that filled the gaps when words failed.

Ivan's color had returned slowly, but there were still moments when Till would look over and see how pale his lips were in the morning light. How his hands trembled slightly when he reached for the water glass. He didn't say anything, but he saw it all.

That morning, a knock came before the door opened. A doctor walked in, tall, composed, clipboard in hand, eyes hidden behind wire-framed glasses that always caught the fluorescent glare.

"Mr. Ivan. Good to see you upright," he said with a practiced, clipped smile.

Till shifted uncomfortably in the corner of the room, arms crossed.

The doctor ran a few checks, heartbeat, breathing, vitals. Then he motioned for Ivan to speak with him outside the room.

"Just for a moment," he said politely, nodding at Till.

But Till didn't miss the way Ivan tensed slightly before he slid off the bed, adjusting his hospital gown with slow, aching movements.

He watched them through the glass panel in the door.

The hallway was quiet, but the tension between Ivan and the doctor was sharp, visible even without sound. The doctor said something low. Serious. His hand clenched around his clipboard. Ivan stared at him, unreadable, and then finally nodded once, slow and heavy, like he was being handed something too much to carry.

When Ivan came back inside, his face was blank. Not calm. Just… tired.

The kind of tired that came from more than just physical recovery.

Till sat up straighter, his gut twisting.

“What was that about?”

Ivan didn’t meet his eyes.

“Just updates. He said I should rest. That I’m stable enough to leave tomorrow.”

Till narrowed his eyes. He didn’t believe that was all. Not for a second. But he also knew pushing too hard would make Ivan shut down completely.

So instead, he shifted the conversation.

“I think…” he started, rubbing the back of his neck, “you should go back to your parents' place. Just for a bit.”

Ivan looked up.

“You need space to recover,” Till continued, voice firmer. “Your apartment’s small and full of stuff you probably don’t wanna look at right now. I mean, it might suffocate you, being back there too soon.”

There was a pause.

“I can go with you,” Till added. “Just help settle you in. Make sure you’re okay.”

Ivan blinked, and for a moment, Till saw something flicker behind his dark eyes. Something soft and longing.

Then it was gone.

Replaced by a small, tired smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“That’s sweet,” Ivan said quietly, his voice raw with exhaustion.

“But I’m okay. I can go myself.”

He turned his gaze out the window as if he couldn’t bear to say the next part while looking at Till.

“Thanks, Till.”

Two words. Simple.

But they felt like a goodbye.

Like a line was being drawn again, gently, deliberately.

Till didn’t answer right away. He just stared at Ivan’s profile, the curve of his jaw, the shadows under his eyes, the slight tremble in his fingers as he rubbed his wrist absentmindedly.

Something was wrong. Something the doctor hadn’t said.

But Till didn’t know how to reach him anymore.

So he just nodded, pretending it didn’t hurt.

“Alright” he said.

Even if his chest ached with the distance growing between them again.

The hospital air still clung to his skin, sterile, cold, tinged faintly with antiseptic, even as he stepped out into the sunlit world.

He hadn’t said much when he left, only offered a quiet refusal to Till’s repeated offer to accompany him. But he let him pack the bag. Watched in silence as Till folded his clothes, his hands brushing over each fabric like it meant something. Ivan didn’t stop him. Couldn’t.

Now, the city blurred past the car window like watercolors bleeding into one another. His heart drummed against the inside of his chest, not with excitement or anticipation, but with a hollow kind of dread that grew heavier the closer he got.

Home.

He stood in front of the tall gates of the estate, an old weight pressing into his spine like a familiar ghost. The family driver greeted him with a brief nod before opening the door, but Ivan barely registered it.

His legs moved on their own, carrying him across the polished walkway, each step echoing on stone. The house loomed ahead, elegant, pristine, and quiet. Too quiet.

The door opened before he could knock.

“Ivan, my baby!” his mother gasped, her voice a rich, musical trill. She swept toward him in a flurry of perfume and pearls, her crimson nails gleaming as they spread wide for an embrace.

She engulfed him instantly, soft arms wrapping around his frame like silk drapes. Her chin rested lightly against his shoulder, her red lips brushing his cheek as she sighed in relief.

“You’re home.”

Ivan let his arms circle her with a gentleness that felt rehearsed. One hand lightly touched the curve of her back, the other loosely curled at her waist. He buried his nose in the scent of her, roses and faint alcohol, sharp and sweet.

“I’m home,” he murmured, voice low.

When she finally pulled back, her eyes were glistening, carefully lined and mascaraed, not a smudge out of place. She held his face in both hands, as if checking he was real.

“You look thinner,” she tutted softly. “We’ll fix that. A proper meal, a long bath. You’ll feel better soon.”

Behind her, standing like a shadow carved in stone, was his father.

Tall, statuesque, dressed in pressed slacks and a high-collared shirt with silver cufflinks. His hair was slicked back without a single strand out of place, and his gaze bore down with an intensity that felt like it could peel layers off your skin.

He didn’t speak.

Just looked at Ivan, sharp, expectant, unreadable.

Ivan straightened subtly, masking his limp with practice.

He nodded once. “Father.”

His father inclined his head barley in return, a motion so restrained it almost felt like contempt.

Neither of them said anything else.

The silence that followed was familiar.

Smothering.

His mother stepped aside with a smile too wide for the room, motioning toward the grand hallway.

“Come in, come in. You need rest. Everything is ready. Your room is just how you left it.”

Ivan followed without a word, dragging his bag behind him.

The house swallowed him whole.

Chapter End Notes

Ivan, communication where?
Till is getting tired of your ahh
I think I overdid Luka's description. Lmao.

"Stay" omggg flashbacks when Till was drunk.

You shouldn't go home, Ivan. Oops spoiler...

When's his suffering going to end?!
Hang in there, y'all. Trust me.

Chapter 18: Home

Chapter Summary

> Unsha slammed his fist down. The plates rattled, wine spilled over the edge of the crystal glass. The sound of his mother's fork clattering onto her plate rang loud in the silence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The clink of silverware echoed softly in the opulent dining hall. Crystal glasses stood untouched beside plates arranged with precision, an elaborate meal that had long lost its warmth.

Ivan sat across from his parents, posture perfect, his back straight like a soldier in parade rest. The chandelier above cast long shadows over the white linen tablecloth, glinting off the polished cutlery and china that had likely cost more than a month's salary for most people.

His mother chatted idly about meaningless things, a new event she was invited to, an upcoming charity gala, the chef's poor performance in the last meal.

Ivan nodded at all the right moments. Smiled when it was expected. Played the role.

Then his father, Unsha finally spoke, cutting through the silence with a voice honed by decades of command.

"I heard you fainted," Unsha said, not looking up from his steak, slicing through it with meticulous control.

“In the middle of your presentation.” he continued.

Ivan’s hand paused around his fork. He blinked once, slowly, before answering.

“It was due to stress.”

The response was measured, calm, and detached. But the weight in the room shifted.

Unsha set his knife down. His eyes, dark as obsidian, lifted from his plate and settled on Ivan like a blade.

“Is that how an Alpha should act?”

Ivan did not flinch. His throat moved with a quiet swallow, then he met his father’s gaze with calm restraint. “I apologize. It won’t happen again.”

The air grew heavier, more stifling.

Unsha leaned back in his chair with a scoff, the corner of his mouth twitching in disdain. “Is it because of that Beta?”

Ivan blinked. His chest tensed, heart skipping like a misfired rhythm. “Father—”

“Till, wasn’t it?”

Ivan’s hand clenched under the table. His eyes met his father's again, sharper now, darker. His tone shifted, colder. Firmer.

“Don’t drag Till into this.”

His mother, sensing the atmosphere darken, quickly intervened. “Honey, please. Don’t argue at the dinner table. We’re still eating—”

But Unsha was unmoved. “You know how to talk back when I mention that filth’s name.”

Ivan tried to breathe evenly. “He doesn’t belong in this conversation —”

The table jolted violently as Unsha slammed his fist down. The plates rattled, wine spilled over the edge of the crystal glass. The sound of his mother’s fork clattering onto her plate rang loud in the silence.

Ivan stood up.

He bowed his head slightly, the last scrap of formality still clinging to his frame. “I apologize. I seem to have lost my appetite.”

Unsha’s voice dropped to a growl, low and thunderous. “Come back here. We’re not done.”

Ivan stopped mid-step. Slowly turned. “What is it we have to talk

about?”

Unsha stood. Towering. A cold, brutal presence across the table.

“I let you befriend that filth because you *swore* not to embarrass this family. Not to make mistakes. But what do you do?” His voice dripped venom with each word.

“You cling like a parasite. Following him like some starved mongrel. Is that what a dominant Alpha should do? Is that the legacy you want to carry?”

Ivan’s fists trembled at his side. “I won’t do it again. I’ll fix it. But Till —he didn’t do anything to deserve that. Don’t drag him into my mess. I’ll take the fall, but he—”

The crack of a *slap* sliced through the room.

Ivan’s head snapped sideways from the force, the sound of it sharp and obscene in the silence. His jaw throbbed, teeth biting the inside of his cheek as the sting burned across his skin. For a moment, the world tilted.

His mother gasped in horror, rising from her seat too late to stop it. “Unsha!”

Ivan didn’t move. He slowly turned his head back, breathing through his nose.

“You dare still defend him?” Unsha seethed, stepping forward.

Another slap.

Harder. Sharper. Enough to make Ivan stagger slightly on his feet.

Unsha calmly picked up a napkin and wiped his hand, slow and deliberate, as if he had touched something revolting.

“I don’t have a son who is weak,” he said.

“Who lets himself be ruled by his emotions like a pathetic, lovesick child. You were born to lead. To dominate. Not to be consumed by obsession.”

He threw the napkin onto the table.

“You used to be sharp. Proud. Everything an Alpha heir should be. But that boy—he infected you. Like a sickness. And now look at you.” His voice turned colder, a mockery.

“Fainting in front. Defending gutter filth. Disappointing this family again and again.

Ivan stood still, blood ringing in his ears.

“You are not my son when you act like this.”

Every word cut deeper than the slap.

His chest rose and fell slowly, and his tongue burned with all the words he wouldn't say. His face ached. His pride hung in tattered silence between them.

And still, he did not cry.

He only whispered, "Understood, Father."

Then turned and walked out of the dining room.

The moment the door clicked shut behind him, Ivan locked it. He leaned against the heavy oak, fingers lingering on the cool brass knob before sliding down to his side. The silence inside his old room swallowed him whole.

The space was vast, polished, and impeccably maintained a sterile showcase of wealth and breeding. The walls were still the same shade of pale blue from his childhood, but everything else had been reshaped.

Any remnants of innocence were long erased. Toys gone. Drawings removed. No photographs. No trace that he'd ever been young here. Only the cold scent of furniture polish and old money remained.

Despite the room's size, it felt like a cage. Its air was stale, heavy, and suffocating, as if the walls themselves were watching him, judging.

Ivan sat at the edge of the bed, head bowed, his cheek still red-hot from his father's strike. His jaw ached with every breath. He didn't cry. He couldn't. He had trained himself not to.

Then, a knock.

Soft. Almost melodic.

"May I come in?"

A familiar voice, sweet and composed. Too composed.

He didn't lift his head. "Yes, Mother."

The door opened soundlessly.

She entered in a sweep of perfume and silk, gliding more than walking. Her hair was perfectly styled, her long lashes casting elegant shadows over her sharp eyes. Her crimson nails glinted under the chandelier's light, lacquered to perfection, talons dressed in luxury.

Though she was an Omega, she held her own kind of power. A different breed of dominance. One that struck not with volume but with control. Precision. She was the one who taught Ivan how to smile when his lungs were collapsing.

She sat beside him on the bed, placing a cool hand on his bruised

cheek.

“Look at you, my child,” she said softly, the pads of her fingers brushing his skin. Her tone was gentle, almost mournful, but beneath it, something vile slithered.

“You shouldn't have said that to your father.”

Ivan didn’t respond. His lips pressed together in a tight, pale line.

Her hand lingered, cupping his face now, not with affection, but with ownership.

Her voice dripped honey. “Is it true?” she asked, eyes narrowing just a fraction. “You fainted?”

He gave a small nod.

Her smile never wavered, but the glint in her eye sharpened. “You should not be with that boy.”

The air in the room dropped several degrees.

“You know what will happen,” she added.

Her tone remained gentle, but it coiled around his spine like a noose. Her touch, despite its softness, felt more like claws pinning him in place.

Ivan closed his eyes.

Her hand moved behind his neck as she leaned closer, nails grazing the delicate skin beneath his collar. “You know what happens when you disobey, right?”

His voice was empty. “Of course, Mother.”

She pulled him into a hug. Her arms around him were tight, too tight, like velvet-wrapped chains. Her perfume was overwhelming, cloying, a scent he once loved but now made him nauseous.

She whispered into his ear, breath warm against his skin, “Act like a real Alpha… or something bad will happen to that boy.”

He stiffened.

She didn’t need to explain what she meant. She never did. Her long nails pressed into his back just enough to hurt, a subtle threat written in flesh. He could feel the faint sting of them, not enough to draw blood, just enough to remind him of what she was capable of.

He returned the hug with arms that felt like iron rods. His eyes were open, staring blankly past her shoulder.

“I won’t disappoint you again,” he said, voice barely above a whisper.

She smiled, kissed his temple, and whispered, “That’s my child.”

And with that, she stood, brushing off invisible dust from her sleeve, her smile intact like a porcelain mask.

When she left, Ivan was still seated at the edge of the bed, back straight, face expressionless.

The door clicked shut again, gently this time.

And he was alone.

In a room that once held dreams, now only haunted by expectations and threats.

Till sat on the edge of his couch, knees bouncing restlessly, the silence of his room pressing down on him.

His fingers hovered over his phone again, it was the fifth time that day. He bit the inside of his cheek, eyes locked on the screen, the call history filled with his attempts.

He had texted Ivan two days ago.

[Till] : *Let me know when you get there safely.*

No reply.

Then again last night.

[Till] : *Hey. Just wanted to check in. How's your head?*

Still nothing. Not even a "seen."

It wasn't like Ivan to completely vanish like that, at least not to him. Ivan had always been secretive, withdrawn, the kind to swallow his pain until it calcified behind his ribs, but this… this felt different.

Till leaned back, running both hands through his hair in frustration. The memory of Ivan's gaunt face wouldn't leave his head, that bruised silence in the hospital, that look that said I'm tired of pretending and yet I'm not ready to tell you anything.

He scoffed at himself under his breath.

"Coward," he muttered, not at Ivan. At himself.

He didn't know how to reach him. He never did.

Every time he tried to ask, Ivan would dodge it. Smile with that hollow calm. Change the subject. Till hated it, hated how much space Ivan put between them, hated how his voice turned into a wall.

And still… he couldn't bring himself to push harder. He didn't know

how.

Another few minutes passed before he called again. His thumb trembled slightly as he hit the button, pressing the phone to his ear.

It rang once.

Twice.

Then—

click

A connection.

Till's heart skipped.

There was a soft, dragging breath on the other end before a quiet voice broke through.

"…Hey, Till."

Till sat up straight, his eyes wide. Ivan's voice was muffled, raspy, like he hadn't spoken in days. No sharpness. No humor. Just a quiet breath barely stitched into a word.

“Ivan?” Till said, cautious. “You okay?”

A pause.

Ivan sighed faintly. “Yeah. Just woke up.”

That was a lie. Till knew it instantly.

The voice on the other line sounded too tired for someone who just woke up. No grogginess, no stretch of the voice—just… worn. Like he’d been lying in bed with his eyes open for hours, waiting for something to end.

“…What’s wrong?” Till asked softly.

There was silence again.

Too long.

Till’s hand tightened around the phone. “Ivan?”

“I said I just woke up,” Ivan repeated, the same stillness in his tone.

Till closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the wall.

He could hear the lie crawling under Ivan’s breath. But once again,

Ivan gave him nothing more than that.

Still… Till wasn't ready to hang up.

He couldn't.

So he stayed. Listening to the sound of Ivan breathing. Waiting. Hoping. Drowning in the ache of never being able to reach him, not truly.

Till exhaled, quiet but shaky. He tried to pick the words carefully, like stepping barefoot over glass.

"…You didn't answer my texts," he said, gently.

"I just saw them," Ivan replied after a beat. "Sorry."

"That's not like you."

Another pause. Till could almost picture Ivan on the other end, lying stiffly on some expensive bed in some cold house, the phone resting limply in his hand, eyes staring at the ceiling.

"You can't expect me to..." Ivan murmured. "Sorry. I guess I've just been... tired."

Till was taken aback by his response and hesitated.

“Tired of what?”

“…Everything.”

The word dropped like a stone between them. Heavy. Final.

Till swallowed hard. “Ivan… talk to me.”

“I’m fine,” Ivan said, but it sounded like a reflex. Like something memorized. “I just needed time.”

“You don’t sound fine,” Till whispered. “I know you're not fine.”

Silence again. Then a tired chuckle, so faint it barely counted.

“You’ve always been annoyingly observant,” Ivan muttered.

“And you’ve always been bad at pretending you’re okay,” Till countered, voice trembling. “Stop doing that.”

Still no response. The weight of everything they weren’t saying pressed down on both of them.

Till rubbed the heel of his hand against his forehead, breathing through the sudden ache in his chest.

“I keep thinking… maybe I should’ve pushed harder. Made you tell me what’s going on. I just… I didn’t want to scare you off.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Ivan said, quietly. “It’s not you.”

“Then what is it?” Till asked. “Let me in. Just once.”

“I can’t.”

The words were soft, but they gutted Till.

“Why?” he asked. It came out broken. “Why not?”

“I’m trying to protect you,” Ivan said, voice thin and cold at the edges. “And if you knew, if you *really* knew then I’d lose even that.”

His voice cracked.

“I’m not strong like you think I am, Till.”

Till’s throat tightened. He pressed a fist against his chest.

“I don’t want you to protect me,” he said. “I want you to *trust* me.”

But Ivan didn’t answer that. Just silence. Just the soft buzz of a dying connection.

"I should go,” Ivan finally whispered. “My mom’s calling.”

Till closed his eyes. His heart thudded hollow.

“…Okay.”

“Thanks for calling.”

“Yeah,” Till said. “Anytime.”

The call ended.

Till stared at the screen for a long moment, then let the phone slide from his hand to the floor. His room was silent again, but now it echoed with every word Ivan didn’t say.

Chapter End Notes

They are both cowards.

Being slapped twice must've been dreadfully hurt. I may or may not experienced that.

I'll drop chapter 19 today. Bear with me, I've already written the ending and perhaps I'll end this series at chapter 25.

Love y'all.

“You cling like a parasite. Following him like some starved mongrel. Is that what a dominant Alpha should do? Is that the legacy you want to carry?”

‼️Parasite? Paratise mentioned?! Omg lmao, I kinda nailed it‼️

Chapter 19: Over My Dead Body

Chapter Summary

> “As your father,” he continued, n“it is my responsibility to remove threats. To eliminate the weaknesses in your life.”
>
> “What… do you mean?” Ivan asked, voice tight and strained.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ivan's room felt like a tomb.

Even with the towering windows flung wide open, and the ceilings arching high like the ribcage of a cathedral, there was no space to breathe. The sterile chill of the marble floor seeped into his bones, and the silence so absolute, so heavy, pressed against his ears until it roared.

The faintest sound echoed too loudly. Every breath felt too big. Every heartbeat, too small. The walls, gilded with tastefully curated artwork and lined with museum-perfect shelves, didn’t comfort him. They loomed. They judged. They mocked.

This house had never been a home. Not even close. It was a cage dressed in grandeur, an exhibit of wealth with no warmth. Expensive, curated, cold. A place built to impress the world—but never to hold love.

A knock interrupted the stillness.

Three slow, deliberate taps. Precise. Controlled.

Ivan didn't need to guess. That rhythm had been etched into his memory before he could spell his own name. He didn't even glance at the door.

"Young master," came the voice, polished smooth with age and service. The old butler. Always dutiful. Always watching.

Ivan's eyes remained shut "I told you not to call me that."

A brief, weighted pause followed. Then came a soft exhale, like the last breath of a dying dream.

"My apologies," the butler murmured. "I suppose I slipped. Back when —"

"Just tell him I'll be there in a minute."

The quiet footsteps faded, retreating into the hall.

Ivan stayed still for another moment, eyes opening slowly to stare at the ceiling as if hoping it would collapse and end everything.

Then, without ceremony, he pushed himself off the edge of the bed. His bare feet touched the marble, cold slicing up his legs like knives, but he didn't flinch. Pain was a welcome companion. Familiar. Honest.

He walked without hesitation, each step echoing down the corridor like the ticking of a doomsday clock. The mansion swallowed him, its

halls long and unwelcoming, each corner dustless and dead.

He passed portraits of men who shared his face, harp jaws, dark eyes, stiff shoulders glaring down at him with the judgment of generations. Their painted gazes followed him like curses, their silence screaming louder than words.

When he reached the office, he didn't knock.

He pushed the massive double doors open with both hands. The weight of them resisted, but he shoved through anyway, stepping into the lion's den.

His father sat behind the obsidian desk like a monarch on a throne. The room was dimly lit, shadows clinging to the corners. Bookshelves lined the walls, filled with volumes chosen more for prestige than personal taste. A fire flickered in the hearth, casting dancing shapes on the polished stone. But none of it could soften the presence at the center of it all.

Unsha.

He was statuesque even in stillness. Broad shoulders framed by a tailored suit, steel-gray hair combed back immaculately. His posture was flawless, composed to the point of inhumanity.

He didn't look up. He didn't need to. The pen in his hand glided across paper in a smooth, practiced motion, its scratch barely audible over the tick of the grandfather clock behind him.

Ivan stood, waiting. Just like always. But this time… something in

him shifted. The weight on his chest didn't make him sink. It sharpened him. It hollowed out the fear and filled it with something else, cold and cutting.

Finally, the pen stopped.

Click.

Unsha set it aside with deliberate grace, but still didn't look up. "Your grades have slipped."

His voice was soft, almost gentle. But it sliced with surgical precision, every syllable an incision.

Ivan's spine straightened. "I've been dealing with a lot. Stress—"

A single hand raised. Curt. Dismissive. Commanding.

"Stress," his father repeated, tasting the word like it was a spoiled fruit. "Again? Can't you come up with a better excuse?"

"How convenient." He looked up at last, eyes narrowing with predatory focus.

"You've thrived under pressure your whole life. So what changed?" He leaned forward slightly. "Tell me. What is it now?"

Ivan's fingers curled into fists at his sides. He didn't speak.

Unsha's gaze sharpened like a blade. "Is it him?"

Ivan's breath hitched. His eyes ignited. "I told you, don't bring Till into this. This is my responsibility—"

"Don't interrupt me," Unsha snapped.

And then the air shifted.

It slammed into Ivan's lungs before he could brace. His father's pheromones detonated into the space like a bomb.

The atmosphere turned viscous, like syrup flooding the room, dragging every breath, every movement into resistance. The walls pressed in. The lights dimmed. The air itself tasted metallic, suffused with something toxic burnt iron, scorched wood, the chemical tang of decay wrapped in dominance.

Ivan staggered for half a second before locking his knees.

This was the raw power of an Alpha who ruled by fear. Who'd built empires and shattered wills. It filled the room with the stink of command, of threat, of ownership. It crawled down Ivan's throat and gripped his spine. His instincts screamed to submit. To lower his eyes. To kneel.

He didn't.

Unsha's voice returned, a cold whisper that carried more weight than a shout.

"You walk around acting like you've earned your name. But look at you. Weak. Fractured. Letting some boy infect your mind. Your work. Your duty to this family."

Ivan fought for air, vision swimming red. "Till has nothing to do with this."

"Everything," Unsha hissed, voice rising, "is about that rat."

He leaned forward, elbows pressing into the desk as though anchoring the truth. His gaze burned with contempt.

"I've tolerated your emotional nonsense long enough. But now it's compromising your future. My legacy."

"You should work on your temper," he said, voice low and icy. "And your discipline."

He scribbled something on the paper in front of him, his movements clean, deliberate, final. Like he had already decided the outcome long before this moment.

"As your father," he continued calmly, "it is my responsibility to remove threats. To eliminate the weaknesses in your life."

Ivan's breath caught in his throat.

He looked up—eyes wide, the red bleeding subtly into his irises.

“What… do you mean?” he asked, voice tight, strained.

Unsha finally met his gaze. There was no warmth in his expression. Only cold, unwavering certainty.

“I’m planning to erase the filth in your life,” he said simply.

Ivan’s breath caught. His chest tightened like a vice.

“You wouldn’t,” he whispered.

Unsha leaned back in his chair, composed, pleased. “I will. You’ve mistaken my patience for leniency. But this ends now.”

The desk shuddered as Ivan’s fists slammed into it.

“You touch him, and I’ll kill you.”

The words dropped like iron into the room. They weren’t bluster. They were promise.

Unsha didn’t blink. “If you’d rather debase yourself chasing after a Beta mutt than fulfill your role, then you’re already lost.”

He stood, slowly, like the rise of a storm cloud. “But I will not allow your shame to stain this bloodline. I will cut him out like rot.”

Ivan’s lips curled into a snarl. His voice cracked through the air, jagged and ragged.

“Over my dead body.”

Unsha tilted his head, serene and merciless. “So be it.”

That was all it took.

Ivan turned and ran.

The doors slammed open with a thunderous crash. His heart pounded in sync with his footfalls as he stormed through the corridor.

“Y-Young master—!” the butler exclaimed as Ivan tore past, eyes wide with alarm.

Ivan didn’t slow. He didn’t answer. His feet bled against the marble, but he felt nothing. His breath came in ragged bursts, mind a blur of red urgency. He blasted through the front entrance, into the night.

Cold wind whipped against his skin, cruel and sharp, but he welcomed it. He sprinted barefoot through the courtyard, past the neatly manicured garden where every bush had been clipped to perfection.

Past the metal gates that clanged behind him like closing prison bars.

The city lights blurred as he ran.

He didn't know how long it would take to reach Till.

But he would. He had to.

Before the monster behind that desk erased the only good thing Ivan had ever known.

He didn't feel the cracked pavement beneath his feet anymore. Not really. The sharp gravel sliced into the soles of his bare feet, skin splitting, blood smearing in jagged streaks, but his mind had numbed the pain in favor of something far more terrifying.

Where is he? Where is Till?

The wind tore at his sweat-drenched shirt, plastering it to his skin like a shroud, but it wasn't the cold that made his body tremble.

His phone shook in his hand as he pressed call again.

5% battery.

The number burned back at him like a countdown to detonation, each blink of the screen thudding in time with his erratic heartbeat.

No answer.

He called again.

Still no answer.

His thumb hovered over the screen, slick with sweat and something darker. His hands weren't steady, they barely felt like they were part of him anymore. The world tilted and stretched at the corners, distorted. Every passing car felt like it carried a scream. Every silhouette twisted into the shape of someone coming to take Till away.

And then—

It hit.

Like a freight train.

The pain didn't ease in.

It detonated.

It cracked through his sternum like lightning, vicious and immediate, splitting his breath in half. He staggered, knees collapsing under him. The world swam, light fractured. He caught himself on a street post,

the metal slamming into his shoulder hard enough to echo through bone.

But he didn't feel it.

Because this was worse.

So much worse.

It didn't feel like his chest hurt, it felt like his chest was the pain. Like something monstrous had curled inside him, dug into his ribs, and was now ripping its way out.

His entire torso seized, lungs folding in, ribs compressing. The air became needles, every inhale carving into the soft tissue like glass. He dropped to one knee, body folding, mouth open in a silent scream.

His throat clawed at the air, but oxygen wouldn't come. His fingers tore at his shirt, nails dragging down fabric, desperate to open himself up, to let something out.

Not now. Not now. Not now.

Not now. Not now. Not now.

Not now. Not now. Not now.

Like a hook had embedded itself behind his heart and was pulling.

Pulling hard.

Tearing.

He coughed once, then again, each fit harsher than the last until his entire body convulsed. A sickening, dry sound, as if he were trying to expel his own soul. His vision cracked into pieces, grey swallowing the edges, colors bleeding out of the world.

He felt something warm drip from his nose.

Blood.

Maybe.

Fuck.

He didn't care.

He couldn't even feel his legs anymore. He was shaking so hard, he almost dropped his phone. But the panic, the terror, gripped him tighter than the pain ever could.

What if they already found Till?

What if they touched him? Hurt him?

What if his father—

"No…" he rasped. "No. No no no…"

He forced himself up. Every muscle screamed. His limbs weren't moving, they were being dragged forward by sheer will. His feet felt like lead, his body like it was being pushed from the inside out with hot iron. Every step was agony, metal scraping bone, skin tearing over raw nerves, but he moved.

Because if he stopped—

If he was too late—

He would never forgive himself.

He hit call again.

Ring.

Ring

Pick up. Please. Please, please just pick up.

The pain flared white-hot behind his sternum. His vision pulsed with static. His teeth clenched so hard it felt like his jaw might crack. His hand was barely holding onto the phone now. His other arm dragged against the wall, trying to keep him upright.

Ring.

Ring.

Pick up. Pick up, Till.

Ring.

“Iva—”

“WHERE ARE YOU RIGHT NOW?!”

His voice ripped from him like a dying thing. Raw. Bloody. Shattered.

There was a stunned silence.

Till’s voice came slow, cautious. “Why are you screaming—”

“JUST ANSWER THE QUESTION. WHERE. ARE. YOU?” Ivan’s voice shook like a dam about to give way. His legs nearly gave out again. He slammed his hand into the brick wall beside him to stay up.

“Calm down, you’re scaring me! I’m in the middle of the road, going to the café—”

“STAY THERE.” His voice cracked. He wasn’t screaming anymore—just trembling, frantic, almost begging.

“Don’t go anywhere. Just, stay.”

“Ivan, what the fuck is happening with you?” Till’s voice cracked, uncertain, almost afraid.

But Ivan couldn’t explain.

Couldn’t speak past the iron band around his chest.

He slumped against the building, gasping, one hand still clenched around his phone like a lifeline, like the only thread tethering him to reality.

2% battery.

He stared at the number. The red seemed to bleed.

His lips moved, but no sound came out.

Then finally, his hoarse voice splintered.

“Just stay there.”

Chapter End Notes

I think Till will die..
Not sure..

Gahh, the pills' effect strikes again. Bad timing□♂□□♂□

Chapter 20: Burning Wood

Chapter Summary

> Till scanned the area. His eyes landed on a man across the road, leaning against a post. Unremarkable clothing, a cap shadowing his face. But something about him was off. Too still. Too tense. And then—

Chapter Notes

> !!READ AT YOUR OWN RISK!!
> This chapter contains severe blood loss and gore.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Till stared at the screen, blinking. His brows furrowed.

What the fuck was that?

Ivan had sounded unhinged. Desperate. Angry. Like something inside him had cracked wide open. And that.. that wasn't normal. Even for Ivan.

The street was quiet. A little too quiet. The sun hung low, dipping past the buildings and casting long shadows on the sidewalk. A slight breeze brushed against Till's face, cool against his flushed cheeks.

He pocketed his phone slowly, about to take a step forward, when he stopped.

A chill skated down his spine.

Goosebumps rose on his arms.

He turned his head slightly.

Someone was watching him.

The kind of stare that wasn't curious or passing, no. It was sharp. Fixed. Predatory.

He scanned the area. His eyes landed on a man across the road, leaning against a post. Unremarkable clothing, a cap shadowing his face. But something about him was off. Too still. Too tense. And then —

The man moved.

His coat shifted.

Something metal glinted in the light.

Till's heart dropped into his stomach.

Gun.

Gun.

But before his mind could even form the word, a voice roared from the other side of the street

“TILL!”

His head snapped in the direction of the voice.

Ivan.

Wild.

Blood-smeared.

Barefoot.

Running like his life depended on it, or someone else’s did.

Before Till could even react, Ivan crashed into him.

It wasn’t just a hug, it was a full-bodied collision. Ivan wrapped around him like a shield forged of flesh and fury. One arm locked tight around Till’s back, hand splayed between his shoulder blades, pressing him flush to his chest.

The other arm crossed in front of Till’s chest, forearm curling upward, shielding his throat like a barricade. Ivan’s fingers curled around the base of Till’s neck, firm, trembling, possessive.

He tucked Till into the hollow of his body, head to chest, spine to

wall, as if trying to fold him into his own ribcage. As if he could become armor.

Then—

BANG.

The gun fired.

Ivan jerked—but didn't fall.

"IVAN!"

Till flinched with a scream, instinctive and sharp, feeling the impact rock through Ivan's body. He twisted, trying to look, but Ivan didn't even grunt. Didn't cry out.

He just held Till tighter.

Ivan's legs staggered wide to brace them both. His bare feet scraped the pavement, raw and bloody, but he didn't flinch. He bowed his body around Till protectively, shoulders hunched, head low, like an animal ready to take another shot.

His chest heaved against Till's back. Every breath was jagged, as if he'd been sprinting for miles, but it was more than exertion. It was panic. Raw, feral panic.

“Ivan—!” Till gasped, barely able to breathe with the sheer force of how tightly Ivan held him. “What’s happening?!”

Ivan didn’t answer.

Couldn’t.

His face was buried in Till’s hair, nose pressed to his scalp, breath hot and ragged against his skin. His jaw trembled. Every part of him was shaking, not from weakness, but from rage. From pain. From something ancient and instinctive and terrifyingly primal.

Suddenly.

It hit.

Pheromones.

Heavy. Suffocating. *Wrong.*

Till, a *Beta*—wasn’t even supposed to sense pheromones, but this? This wasn’t scent. This was presence. A storm. A wildfire.

The scent of freshly burned forest, acrid smoke, pine sap, and scorched earth soaked in sudden rain. It clawed its way down his throat, curled in his lungs, made his knees buckle.

Ivan tightened his grip again, as if sensing Till sway. His body curled

tighter around him, shielding even his flanks. There was no hesitation, no space left unguarded.

Nothing would touch Till. Not while Ivan was here.

And Ivan, his body was strung tight as a bowstring. Every muscle coiled. Every tendon screamed. His teeth clenched so hard his jaw ticked. Blood now smeared the corner of his mouth. Then he turned his head—

—and his eyes…

They weren't black anymore.

They were red.

A deep, burning crimson, not glowing, not shimmering. Burning.

It wasn't just color. It was intent. It was rage.

It was the end of reason.

Then Ivan moved.

Just a shift of his stance. A slight step forward. But it was enough.

His gaze locked onto the shooter.

And everything inside him snapped.

He charged.

A blur of black hair, bare feet, and bloodstained limbs. He moved like an animal let off its leash. The man raised his arm, gun lifting. Fingers curling on the trigger.

BANG!

The second shot rang out, thunder echoing through the alley.

The bullet struck again.

Ivan staggered, left thigh exploding in red. But he didn't slow. He didn't stop.

He roared. Not a scream. Not a shout. A full-bodied, throat-ripping snarl.

They crashed to the pavement. Flesh and bone slammed into concrete. Ivan landed hard on top, a snarl twisting his face. The gun fired again, a third crack and another bullet tore through Ivan's side, just below the ribs.

He grunted, but didn't falter.

Didn’t care.

Because pain didn’t matter.

Till was behind him. Alive. Still breathing.

And that was all that mattered.

The gun skittered away across the sidewalk, clattering like the rattle of death. Ivan’s hand shot out, dragging the shooter’s arm down, pinning it, then slamming his elbow into the man’s jaw. A crack. Then another. Blood flew.

But the shooter was no amateur, he kicked upward, hard, smashing into Ivan’s gut.

Ivan choked, blood spitting from his lips and was thrown back a few inches.

Then the shooter lunged. Fists swinging. They grappled, hand to hand.

Punches flew.

The shooter hit Ivan across the face, once, twice.

Ivan’s lip split. His nose cracked. His head snapped to the side.

But he didn’t even blink.

He surged forward and sank his teeth into the man’s shoulder, a snarl muffled against skin. The shooter screamed. Ivan didn’t let go until he tasted blood.

The shooter landed another wild punch, right across Ivan’s temple. The world spun, but he welcomed it. Let it feed him. Fuel him.

Then—

Ivan caught his arm.

With one hand on the wrist, the other on the elbow.

And with a soundless snarl, he twisted.

Hard.

A crack, then a wet pop. The shooter howled, his shoulder dislocating from the socket, the arm bent grotesquely behind him.

But Ivan wasn’t done.

He grabbed the ruined limb, lifted it and began slamming it against the concrete.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Bone hit stone. Blood spattered in rhythmic bursts. Screams turned into gargles.

The shooter's face was contorted in agony, but he still fought, reaching up with his good hand to claw at Ivan's face, gouging at his eyes.

Ivan pulled back, just enough.

Then drove his head forward.

Skull to skull.

Crack.

The man's head snapped back, blood bursting from his nose.

Till wanted to look away.

But he couldn't.

Because he'd never seen Ivan like this.

Never seen anyone like this.

Ivan grabbed him by the collar, hauled him forward—and punched him in the throat.

The man choked. Wheezed. Eyes bulging. But Ivan didn't let up.

His knuckles were ruined now. Skin torn off, raw and red and open. Every punch was a wet, sickening *thud*. But he kept going. Until the man stopped moving.

Chest heaving. Face soaked in blood. Hair matted.

Ivan was shaking.

Then, the shooter moved again.

Weakly.

Fingers twitching toward the gun a few feet away.

Ivan limped over.

Picked it up.

He held the gun, then turned it on himself.

Pressed it to his *own* temple.

Voice trembling, broken, and soaked in rage:
“Tell that old hag… if he ever lays a hand on Till—”

A breath. A hitch.
“I’ll shoot myself. Right here. Right fucking now.”

The shooter froze.

So did the air.

So did Till.

Ivan’s eyes didn’t burn anymore. They flickered, dimming embers under storm clouds.

But his voice was still fire.

“I’m not bluffing. If he tries this again—if any of you come near him—I’ll end myself before you even breathe his name. You understand what that means?”

His voice cracked.

Then he spit blood on the pavement. As he added—
“He wouldn’t let his only precious son die.”

The shooter, bloodied and barely conscious, said nothing.

Because there was nothing to say.

Silence blanketed the alley.

Ivan’s fingers slipped from the trigger.

And he dropped the gun.

It clattered to the concrete. Rolled. Fell into the gutter.

He stood there for a moment. Wavering. Bleeding from his thigh and side. Chest rising in ragged gulps.

Barefoot. Shirt shredded. Hands dripping.

Then he turned.

And saw Till.

Still frozen against the café wall. Eyes glassy. Mouth parted.

Shock. Horror. Unexplainable.

Ivan limped toward him.

Every step was agony. But he made them anyway.

His body trembled. His legs buckled. But he made it.

He stopped in front of him.

Till's breath caught.

Ivan's eyes, once glowing red, were almost black again. Hollow. Glassy. A distant flicker of something human.

Then Ivan spoke, voice hoarse and wrecked.

"…Are you hurt?"

Till couldn't answer. He just shook his head. Slowly.

Ivan gave a slow, jerky nod. A tremor ran through him.

Then his knees finally gave out—

And he collapsed.

Right into Till’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

I'm feeling kind today.. so I changed everything and let Till live-kidding, I wasn't planning to kill him in the first place! Coughss

Halloo, I'm back. I hope I made the fight scene blutal.

Bro ate flesh, welp. How did bro survived 3 shots? Oh, did he?

Hehehe, we are so close to enddd.

"I thought Ivan was an Omega now."
I know some of you are confused about this chapter. Let me clarify. It’s not that Ivan became an Omega just because he took the pill.

It’s more accurate to say that the pill gave him the sense or perhaps the courage to become the person he always wanted to be. The changes he’s made, like eating certain sweets or altering his behavior, aren’t direct effects of the pill itself.

Instead, they reflect his desire to transform into someone he’s longed to be, just someone different from who he was. The pill didn’t cause the change, it simply gave him a reason, or maybe a push, to start becoming that person. All it really did was bring him more pain and making him weak.

In short, you may say that the pill was fake. Uhhh, spoilers.

Chapter 21: To Sleep Forever

Chapter Summary

> He looked at Till like he'd never seen him before.
>
> Like the person in front of him wasn't the same one he loved.
>
> Like Till had just torn out what little was left of him and left it bleeding on the floor.

Chapter Notes

> ‼️CHAPTER WARNING‼️
> Heavy dialogues and severe pain.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darkness pressed in from all sides. It wasn't the soft quiet of night, but the thick, suffocating kind, the kind that felt like drowning in wet ash. Ivan stood alone, barefoot on cracked earth, his breath steaming in the cold void. There was no sky. No stars. Just endless black.

And silence.

Until it wasn't.

The world shifted. A flicker. A breath. Then came the sound, it was wet and awful. Like meat being torn from bone.

He turned his head.

And there, scattered in front of him were pieces. Not things. Not objects.

People.

Flesh strewn like garbage. Bones cracked open like dry twigs. A hand with a familiar bracelet. A tuft of silver-gray hair soaked in red. Eyelids half-shut over glazed, unseeing eyes.

Till.

His body, twisted, mangled, half-gone, rested among the wreckage. A smear of color in a sea of gore.

Ivan's stomach dropped. His knees locked.

"No—"

His whisper cracked apart. He stepped back, only to feel a *crunch* beneath his heel.

A tooth.

He looked down and saw more.

Teeth. Nails. Ribbons of skin.

Everyone he touched. Everyone he tried to love. Gone.

Turned into blood.

Turned into guts.

Turned into broken flesh.

His hands were red. His shirt soaked. His fingers ,torn at the nails, shook as he lifted them.

“I didn’t mean to—” he whispered.

But the world didn’t care. The blood kept spreading. The shadows swallowed everything.

And all Ivan could do was watch.

"It’s your fault." Something whispered in his ear.

He turned.

There emerging from the darkness stood a figure. A silhouette. No face. Just a body draped in shadow, inhumanly still. In its hand: a phone. Its screen glowed white-blue in the dark, casting a ghostly light on the figure’s stretched, grinning mouth.

“I gave you the pill,” it sang.

The voice was light. Mocking. Cheerful in a way that made his bones want to snap from the sound.

“I gave you the chance. And look what you did with it.”

It laughed.

Not loudly.

Just enough.

Just enough to hurt.

“You don’t deserve them,” it said. “You never did.”

Ivan’s breath hitched. His body trembled.

The air thickened with rot. With decay. It filled his lungs like tar. His vision blurred. His balance swayed.

He couldn’t move.

He couldn’t run.

His knees buckled, and he dropped hard onto a gravel path that hadn’t been there before.

The stones bit into his skin. The world turned gray.

He clawed at his hair, yanking it in fistfuls, pain flashing behind his eyes. He wanted to scream, wanted to make a sound, but his voice was gone. All that escaped was ragged, panicked breathing. All around him, the echo of laughter. The figure's laughter. Quiet and cruel.

He didn't fight it.

Not this time.

He stayed there.

Crumpled.
Bruised.
Trembling.

Eyes wide. Vision wet.

Everything felt heavy.

Everything hurt.

Nothing ever changed.

Dream or reality, it was always the same. He hurt people. He lost

people. He became a monster. No matter how hard he tried, the result was always the same.

Ruin. Grief. Lose.

He didn't know how to fix anything anymore. Didn't know how to keep living in this loop of bleeding and breaking and aching.

He just wanted to rest.

He just—

Wanted—

To sleep.

Forever.

But light forced its way through.

A sharp, blinding white that clawed through the void and tore him from the rot.

He gasped awake like he'd been pulled from underwater.

The air returned in a violent rush, too much, too fast. His lungs

convulsed. His chest ached.

The room smelled like disinfectant. Like dried blood and sterile walls. The ceiling was too white. The sheets too stiff.

And right beside him—

Till.

Eyes bloodshot. Sleepless. Jaw clenched. His shirt stained with dried red, Ivan’s red. His hands hovered, uncertain, like he didn’t know if he was allowed to touch him again.

Ivan blinked.

The pain in his chest didn’t go away.

He hurt him.

He hurt him again.

He saw it, saw the torment etched in Till’s expression. The trembling of his shoulders. The fear in his breath every time Ivan so much as shifted.

And in that moment, he wished he hadn't woken up.

Because the dream and the real world—

Were both hell.

"I'll call the doctor," Till said, his voice tight, almost breaking under the strain of too many sleepless nights and the ghost of fear still gripping his chest.

Ivan didn't stop him. He watched Till turn and leave the room, steps too quick for calm, but not quite frantic. Just desperate.

Minutes passed in a blur, like thick fog curling around his thoughts. Then came the soft rustle of the door sliding open again.

Not Till.

Mizi burst through the threshold first, the hallway light outlining her figure like an angel in mourning. Her hair fell in long, wavy strands of pink, wild and tangled from sleep or tears or both.

And she *cried,* cried with her whole body, voice breaking like shattered glass as she gasped,

"You're awake… You're really awake…"

She was already by his bedside before he could form a reaction. Her arms wrapped around him, careful not to disturb the lines and gauze

taped to his skin. Her cheek pressed against his chest, and her sobs soaked the fabric of his gown.

Ivan didn't know what to do. His arms remained limp at his sides, fingers twitching as if testing whether they even remembered how to move.

The IV line tugged faintly with every heartbeat. His body ached. His chest ached worse. But he didn't return her embrace.

He didn't push her away either.

He just… let her stay.

Let her cry.

Behind her, quiet footsteps approached. Sua entered the room with the stillness of a storm that had already passed. She stood in the doorway like a sentinel, shoulders squared, posture unreadable. Her face was drawn tight, colder than he remembered, sharper, but not void.

She had cried too. He could see it in the raw edges of her eyes, in the faint tremble of her bottom lip that she held shut with sheer force of will. She didn't speak. She didn't need to. Her gaze pierced through the silence, met his and held.

One nod.

That was all.

Not an approval. Not forgiveness.

Just a reminder. *I told you not to do anything stupid.*

He blinked slowly, eyes dry but vision swimming. Time moved like syrup. Heavy. Stuck.

He didn't deserve any of this.

Not the tears.

Not the worry.

Not the weight of love that still clung to the room like oxygen.

But he didn't have the strength to push it away. Didn't have the courage to hold it, either.

So he let them be.

Mizi's breath eventually steadied. Sua sat at the edge of the bed, never touching, but always present. Her silence was louder than anything else.

Then, the door opened once more.

Till returned, this time not alone. A doctor followed, clipboard in hand, and two nurses pushed a cart of equipment inside. The room turned clinical in an instant, filled with movement and murmurs.

Cold metal touched warm skin. A stethoscope tapped against his sternum. Lights flashed in his eyes. The sharp sting of a needle drew blood from a vein already bruised.

Words swirled around him like waterlogged static.

“Patient is hypotensive. BP dropping but responsive to fluids.”

“Marked dehydration. Likely exacerbated by extended exertion.”

“Hormonal destabilization—extreme suppressant intake. Alpha-to-Omega conversion triggered an acute endocrine crash.”

“Elevated cortisol and adrenaline. Adrenal hyperactivity consistent with a berserker episode.”

“Three GSWs—left thoracic, lower abdomen, and shoulder. No major artery involvement. Possible internal hemorrhaging.”

“Muscle fiber microtears—signs of overexertion. Serum CK elevated.”

“Pheromone profile unstable. Secondary sex characteristic markers in flux. Systemic rejection of induced sub-class.”

He heard them all. He understood none.

He kept his gaze fixed on one thing: the shadow of Till standing near the window. Silent. Unmoving. Arms crossed, but not in defensiveness, in grief. Or guilt. Or both. His figure cast a long shadow

that bled into the corners of the room, refusing to look away.

When the doctors finished, they left with quiet efficiency, fading out into the hall.

Night fell like a curtain. The world dimmed. Silence came again, thick and suffocating. Ivan lay half-upright, chest tight under the bandages, IV still dripping into his arm, surrounded by the faint beeping of machines.

He sensed the presence before he saw it.

Still. Heavy.

Familiar.

“Are you just going to stand there?” Ivan rasped, voice hoarse, barely above a whisper. His lips twitched, attempting a ghost of a smile. “It’s late, Till. You should go home.”

No response.

Ivan tried again, tilting his head just a fraction, enough to glimpse the shape by the window. He pushed past the dryness in his throat.

“What, are you going to cry again?” he said, voice straining toward teasing.

“Was that *your* bloodshot eyes earlier or Mizi’s? You two should compete.”

Still, silence.

The machines beside him ticked on rhythmically, but the pause in Till’s breath was louder than any beeping.

Ivan let the silence stretch before breaking it again, forcing a smirk that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“What, are you standing guard now? Hoping I’ll try to make a dramatic escape with my IV pole?”

Still no answer.

His smirk faltered, gentled into something almost sheepish.

“You look like shit..” he added, his voice quieter now, teasing but soft.

“Guess I really scared you, huh?”

Till didn’t respond.

But the shape in the dark moved, stepping slowly out of shadow and into the moonlight.

“Why did you do it?” the Beta suddenly asked.

Ivan blinked. The words didn’t land at once. He was so used to questions he could dodge, or explain away with a smile. But not this one. Not from him. His breath stuttered. Confused, dazed, exhausted.

“I had to,” Ivan said eventually, his voice low, almost rehearsed. It was the kind of answer meant to deflect more than explain.

“You were in danger. Are you mad? I’m sorry. But I had to. It’s normal to protect you.”

"It left me no choice."

He didn’t want to look weak. He didn’t want Till to see the wreckage beneath the calm.

But Till didn’t move. His fists were trembling at his sides, his jaw clenched so tight it looked painful.

“You were shot,” he said, the words trembling as they left his lips. “Three fucking times. You bled out in front of everyone like it was nothing. You almost died. You lost so much blood—”

“Then, I *will* die,” Ivan cut in sharply.

The air shifted, like a knife slicing through still water.

Till's breath hitched. His head jerked slightly like he hadn't heard him right.

"What the fuck does that supposed to mean?" His voice cracked, raw with panic and confusion. "What the fuck do you mean you will die?"

Ivan met his eyes, and there was something terrifying in the calm of his expression.

"It means I've already made peace with it."

"Peace?" Till echoed, louder now, voice pitching into something dangerously close to a scream.

"You've made peace with dying?! You'd rather die just to save me?!"

"Yes." Ivan didn't hesitate. His answer fell like a hammer.

Till staggered back half a step. His face twisted into something shattered and furious all at once.

"You idiot—you stupid, stupid asshole!" he shouted, voice sharp enough to pierce."You'd throw your life away just like that? Give me your body like it's nothing? Like you're disposable?"

Ivan didn't blink.

"You want to die that badly?" Till's voice cracked again. "Is that it?

You'd rather disappear than let me get hurt?"

There was no answer. Just silence, loud and suffocating.

"DO YOU EVEN HAVE ANY FUCKING SELF-PRESERVATION LEFT?" Till barked, stepping closer, almost shaking.

"What if you die next time, Ivan? What if there's no one to pull you out? No hospital, no miracle—just gone? You'll leave us with your corpse and some fucked-up idea of a sacrifice? You'll leave me?!"

The alpha's mouth is slightly open, his shoulders so still they could've been carved from stone.

Till stared at him, eyes red now, voice trembling. "Why did you take it?"

Ivan looked confused. "What?"

"Don't." Till growled. "Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about."

The silence shifted again.

"Why did you take the damn pill?"

Ivan stiffened.

“How did you—”

“The doctor told me,” Till interrupted. “They told me everything. That pill—it’s killing you. It’s destroying you, asshole. And you knew it. You knew exactly what you were doing.”

Ivan’s mouth opened, but nothing came. His throat burned, dry.

“You’re rotting from the inside out for what?” Till’s voice trembled. “To turn yourself into a fucking Omega?”

Ivan winced.

And Till wasn’t done.

Till’s voice rose, a sharp, agonized bark. “Is that what you thought you had to be?!”

Ivan looked away. His arms hung limp. And still, no words came. No defense. No excuse. Only that sinking, spinning feeling of being seen and wrong and ashamed.

“You’ve been vomiting. Fainting. Bleeding. Your ruts are out of control! Look at you, you're fucking skin and bones!” Till shouted now, louder than he ever had.

Ivan finally raised his head. There was no fire in his eyes. Just empty

spaces where something used to be.

“It’s none of your business,” he whispered.

The silence that followed was deafening.

Till laughed, bitter and broken. It wasn’t funny. It was just pain that didn’t know where else to go.

“None of your business,” he echoed, voice rising again. “Seriously?"

"Is it because of that guy you like?"

Ivan didn’t blink.

Till’s laugh came again, short and ugly.

“Who is he, huh? Tell me."

He spat the words like they tasted like blood.

“You’re destroying yourself for someone who probably doesn’t even know you exist. Who is he, Ivan? Who the fuck is he? Is he worth this? Is he worth your life?”

Still, no answer. And that—that—hurt more than any name Till

could've imagined.

"Whoever he is, just stop this crap. He's a fucking fool! He doesn't see you. He's not worth it. You're hurting yourself, killing yourself, for someone who doesn't care."

His voice dipped, quiet, trembling. Like a string pulled too tight.

"…And I'm tired."

Still. Hollow. Like the words had gutted him in real time.

"You're so fucking *selfish*, Ivan."

Till's voice hitched, eyes glassy with something unshed. He spat the words like venom. But there was no anger behind it. Just despair. Just the burn of someone who didn't know how else to speak pain.

And that—

That was the moment Ivan's world stopped.

He looked at Till as if he'd been stabbed. His eyes widened, his chest stopped moving, and then his face slowly, slowly crumpled.

"Do you even know what it's been like watching you disappear over and over again. I've been trying to understand you. But you refused. You shut me down. All for someone who don't even love yo—?!"

Ivan's face twisted slowly, like something inside was unraveling. His jaw clenched. His chest shuddered.

He looked at Till like he'd never seen him before.

Like the person in front of him wasn't the same one he loved.

Like Till had just torn out what little was left of him and left it bleeding on the floor.

His lips moved. Barely.

"Selfish?"

Ivan repeated, as if trying the word out for the first time. His throat cracked around it.

He laughed. But it wasn't laughter, it was a sound made of shards. Ugly.

"You think I wanted this, Till? All this for me?"

His voice cracked again, but he kept going, each word carving deeper into the air between them.

“Every morning I wake up and I wonder what the hell I’m still doing here. Every time I breathe, it feels like a mistake. I look at myself and I see everything he'd never want.”

His voice grew louder, fraying at the edges. The monitor beeped faster.

“I kept waiting. I kept trying to stay close, to smile when it hurt, to laugh when it felt like my chest was collapsing inwards.

"I waited, Till. For years. I let myself believe that if I'm patient enough, God will grant me. But *He* never did."

Ivan leaned forward, every movement strained like his bones were screaming. The IV line tugged again, tearing slightly at the tape. He didn’t even flinch.

“I didn’t take those pills because I wanted to be an Omega,” he said, quieter now. “I took them because I wanted him. I thought… maybe if I changed, maybe if I suffered enough… I’d be someone worth choosing.”

His lip trembled. But still, no tears. His pain was deeper than tears.

“And you know what hurts the most?” he said, voice barely audible now. “It’s not the vomiting. Not the fainting. Not even the way my body feels like it’s shutting down.”

He looked straight at Till, and something about the way he looked, like a man who had walked too long in the dark made the room feel colder.

“It’s that even now… even after everything I’ve destroyed just to stand in front of him, I’m still not the one he see.”

The words sat heavy between them. They didn’t sting, they scorched.

“I’m tired too, Till,” he whispered, voice breaking. “Not just *you*. I’m tired in my bones. I’m tired in my soul. I feel like I’m dying.”

His fingers curled into the blanket now, knuckles white.

“All I ever *wanted* was to be chosen,” he said, barely more than breath.

“Not because I became someone else. But because maybe, just maybe… who I already was could be enough for someone. For him.”

He exhaled like something had left him.

His eyes were open, but they looked like they had stopped seeing.

His eyes met Till’s, naked and raw.

“Was it really selfish to just want to be loved?”

“You could’ve just told me.”

Till's voice cracked as he said it, quiet, hesitant, like he was afraid the sentence might collapse under the weight of what it meant.

His fists trembled by his sides, and his throat ached with every word. "But why didn't you?" he asked again, eyes never leaving Ivan's. "Why did you hide it from me?"

Ivan looked away.

"Why did you hide it from everyone?" Till's voice was soft but rising with hurt. "From me? I'm your best friend, right? Aren't I? We've always had each other—why didn't you tell me?"

Ivan's breath stuttered. He almost laughed. A bitter, self-loathing sound slipped out of his mouth—half a chuckle, half a sob.

"I apologize," he said, voice uneven. "I'm sorry. It wasn't… very Alpha of me, was it?"

He lifted a trembling hand to his face and dragged it down, as if trying to hold himself together. "I know I'm desperate but I thought—"

He couldn't finish.

"I was foolish to hope," Ivan whispered.

Till stood in stunned silence. His mouth parted like he was going to

speak, but no words came.

“I’m tired of being perfect,” Ivan whispered. “Perfect son. Perfect Alpha. Perfect lie.”

Till’s expression twisted with something helpless and enraged. “Then who is he?” he shouted.

“Who the fuck is he, Ivan?! Why are you always keeping yourself from me? What the hell are you so afraid of?”

Ivan flinched.

“Why can’t you just fucking let me in? Who is that damn bastard you love?! Who is it?”

“Stop yelling,” Ivan muttered, but it came out brittle, almost pleading.

“ANSWER ME!” Till shouted, voice shaking. “Who is he?! Who the fuck made you want to destroy yourself like this?! Who?!”

Ivan’s face went pale. His lips parted, but the words stuck in his throat. He looked at Till with eyes that were suddenly unreadable, dark with something ancient and bruised.

“You really don’t know, Till?” Ivan asked, voice dropping into a whisper. “How… cruel.”

His mouth twitched, not quite a smile. Something sadder. Resigned.

“Of course you don’t. Why would you?

“Ivan—”

“It can’t be helped,” he muttered. “It can’t be helped."

Till eyes wide. “Tell me. Please—who is he?”

“Enough.”

Ivan’s voice cracked like thunder.

Till stilled.

Ivan’s shoulders shook now, as if the very question had ripped something open inside him. “What do you think will change?” he shouted, trembling.

“What do you think will change if I say it out loud? What?! Will the world stop? Will anything get better?”

His voice climbed, hysterical, breaking apart. “You think it’ll fix me? You think saying it will make this pain go away? You think if I just say it, I’ll stop wishing I was someone else?!”

He clutched his side suddenly and doubled over, coughing hard. His body convulsed with each heave, and when he pulled his hand back from his mouth, it was stained dark.

Till’s expression changed instantly. “Ivan—”

“Stop. Don't come any closer.” Ivan barked, his voice desperate. “Just… go home.”

But Till didn’t move. He stepped forward instead, reaching toward him.

“Ivan—look at you! You’re not okay!”

“I said go.” Ivan’s voice broke. “Go home, Till.”

Till’s chest heaved. He was frozen in place, eyes wide, face pale.

“You’re not—”

“I’m fine,” Ivan lied, breathing ragged. “I’m okay. I’ll be okay."

He wasn’t meeting Till’s eyes anymore. He stared down at the floor like a dog waiting to be abandoned.

Till took a shaking breath, but Ivan turned his back to him before he could speak again.

“Just go,” he whispered. “Please, Till. If you care about me even a little… just go.”

And in that silence, the space between them stretched like a chasm vast, echoing, and heavy with all the things they had never said.

Ivan looked so fragile then, like one more word might break him open completely. Like if Till said "I love you" in that moment, he wouldn’t fall apart from pain, but from the unbearable hope of it.

Till stood there, fists trembling, heart breaking, a thousand unsaid confessions burning on his tongue.

Ivan turned away, as if pretending the silence could hurt less than the truth.

And so, Till forced himself to walk away, because staying might’ve broken them both.

The door had shut. The echo still lingered in the room like a ghost.

Ivan sat there, frozen in place. His hands trembled on the hospital blanket. The silence around him wasn’t quiet, it roared. It screamed everything he couldn’t say out loud.

His chest rose and fell in ragged, uneven gasps. He blinked. Once. Twice.

And then it came.

A choked breath cracked out of him, sharp and sudden, like something had snapped inside. He hunched forward, shoulders curling as if trying to hold himself together, but it was no use.

He broke.

The first sob ripped out of his throat, ugly and raw, like it had been waiting years to be freed. Then another came, louder, harsher until he was gasping like he couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't be anymore.

He clutched at his chest, nails digging into his own skin as if trying to tear something out. As if pain could distract him from the pain already devouring him from the inside.

"I tried," he sobbed, voice shredded. "I tried—I tried—I tried—"

It was all he could say.

"I tried."

He curled in on himself like a dying thing, knees pulled up, body shaking violently. The tears poured down his face—hot, desperate, endless. They soaked into the pillow, the blanket, his skin, as he choked and gasped and screamed into the emptiness.

A scream no one would hear.

He wept like he was grieving his own life. Because in truth, he was.

He was mourning the person he used to be. The person he tried to become. The future he had dreamed of, so foolishly, with hands outstretched and heart wide open.

And now, there was nothing.

His voice gave out more than once, cracking mid-scream until he was left in silence again—only for the wave to return stronger, harder.

He hated himself.

He hated how he still loved Till, how even now, he wanted to run after him and beg. But he didn't. He couldn't.

Because love should not feel like this. It should not rot you from the inside. It should not make you want to disappear.

He hit a clenched fist against his chest again and again, each blow harder than the last, as though he could punish the heart that had betrayed him.

And still, the sobs kept coming.

He wept until he couldn't breathe, until his lungs burned and his stomach cramped and he thought he might throw up from the pain alone. He wept until his voice was nothing but a rasp, and his body was slick with sweat and tears.

His face was red and blotchy. His nose ran. His hands clutched the sheets like lifelines.

And when there was nothing left to scream, he whispered, so small, so broken..

“.. I'm sorry, Till.”

A final gasp left him, and he collapsed sideways, trembling like a fevered child, breath shallow, lips quivering.

The silence returned.

This time, it felt like a grave.

But the silence after the tears didn’t last long.

A sudden, sharp pain detonated in Ivan’s stomach, as if something had just burst inside him. His back arched off the bed, his limbs jerking as though he’d been electrocuted.

Then, *white-hot agony*.

It hit like a tidal wave. A surge of nausea, fire, and raw tearing that consumed his body from the inside out. He couldn’t even draw breath, his mouth opened, but only a choked, garbled sound came out.

“—A-Aah—hhhk—!”

Not a scream. Not really. A strangled, broken thing that scraped through his throat like shards of glass. His vocal cords trembled, ripped raw from the inside, refusing to work, refusing to save him.

He jerked against the mattress violently, limbs convulsing, thrashing. The IV stand crashed to the floor. The heart monitor shrieked sharp and frantic as his vitals went berserk.

The door burst open.

“Nurse! Get the restraints—now!”

“He’s seizing—!”

“His body’s rejecting something! Was he given anything recently?!”

But Ivan couldn’t hear them. Not really. Their voices sounded *far away*, like he was submerged underwater, drowning beneath layers of agony and noise.

Make it stop. Make it stop.

Every nerve screamed. Every tendon locked and snapped. His jaw clenched hard enough to crack teeth. His fingers clawed at the sheets, at the air, at nothing. Searching for something. Someone.

His mouth opened again. Another scream. Loud this time. Terrifying. Gut-wrenching.

“AAAAAGHHHHHHHHHHHH—!! HHK—AAAHHH—AAAAHHHH!!”

His voice tore itself raw. So inhuman, it didn't sound like it came from a throat, it sounded like it came from the soul. Blood smeared the inside of his lips, he had bitten his own tongue.

And still, the pain *climbed*. Like fire in his spine. Like razors dragging down the insides of his veins.

A nurse tried to pin his arms down. Another tried to hold his legs. His body wouldn’t stop bucking, twitching, *fighting* against them, against itself.

“Sedate him, *now*! We’re losing him—!”

But Ivan didn’t care. He didn’t hear them. He didn’t feel the needle jabbed into his arm.

All he felt was *hell*.

And all he could do was *reach.*

His hand flailed into the empty space beside him. Blindly. Desperately. Like a child lost in the dark. Like a man about to drown.

Save me, he thought. *Please… someone… just.. save me.*

But there was no one there.

No one to take his hand.

His fingers curled against the cold air, grasping nothing. Trembling. Begging.

And his mind screamed what his throat could not:

I don't want to die like this.
I don't want to be alone.
Till—

But the pain was swallowing him. Dragging him under.

His vision blurred again, not from tears, but from the strain. From the chaos of his heart trying to beat too fast. From the seizures wracking his broken, overburdened body..

He felt his mind slipping. Consciousness tearing at the seams.

A final, helpless scream tore from his lungs as the sedative finally surged through his veins.

And just before the dark took him—

He thought he saw someone.

Or maybe he imagined it.

Still, his hand reached once more.

Fingers stretched.

Like a prayer.

Like a goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

Stay strong, Ivan. This is your plot armor. I went off and tortured you again, I'm sorry. My mind went blank because of the Wiege solo version of you. And now that I think about it... this is the longest chapter I've written so far.

The dialogues in this chapter might feel rushed and possibly out of character, or maybe it's just that the more I write this fic, the more I end up pushing them out of character.

I apologize for that. I just really wanted to see Ivan break. To cry. To finally express something, even while still hiding such a huge truth. He’s been holding in that pain for far too long.

Their fate is cruel..

Chapter 22: Father

Chapter Summary

> His fingers brushed against Till's forehead, cold, elegant, featherlight. A gesture that felt out of place in this mundane space. It sent a chill down Till's spine.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The street was silent when Till finally stepped out of the cab, the hum of the engine fading as it drove off and left him standing beneath the faint yellow light of the streetlamp.

The air was heavy and cold, like the kind that clung to your skin and made your chest ache. He didn't bother locking the gate quietly. The sharp clang of metal echoed into the night, a small act of rebellion, or maybe just exhaustion.

As he pushed open the front door, the familiar scent of eucalyptus and honey greeted him, his mother always kept the diffuser on, even when he wasn't home. It should've felt comforting. But tonight, it just made his stomach twist.

He barely got two steps inside when he heard her voice.

"Till?"

It was soft, almost hesitant. Her voice always had that gentleness that made people want to lean into it. But tonight, it only grated on his nerves.

He didn’t answer, just kicked off his shoes and kept walking.

Io emerged from the kitchen, wearing her usual pastel nightgown, her short ash hair tied back in a small bun. Her eyes were tired but kind.

“You’re home late... I was worried.”

Till avoided looking at her. His jaw clenched slightly as he took a slow breath, but he didn’t stop walking toward the stairs.

She tried again, voice even softer this time. "Are you with Ivan?”

That name.

He paused at the bottom step, his grip tightening on the handrail. His face twitched barely, but it was enough. The irritation surged up in his throat like bile. He didn’t turn around. He didn’t say a word.

“Dear?” his mother called again, confused.

He kept walking.

Step by step, as if each one would keep him from snapping. As if not answering would make the lump in his throat easier to swallow.

He closed the door to his room behind him with more force than necessary.

And once the silence returned, he sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the floor in the dark. His hands trembled slightly, but he shoved them into his pajamas as if hiding them would make the feelings disappear too.

The morning came too quickly.

He hadn't slept. Not really. Just laid there in the dark, his mind racing in an endless loop of last night's conversation.

When dawn broke, he didn't bother with breakfast. He heard movement in the kitchen, the faint clinking of dishes. Io, probably setting the table like she always did. Like things were still normal.

But nothing felt normal anymore.

He walked past the kitchen without a word. Grabbed his bag. And left. The door shut quietly behind him.

He was halfway to school when his phone buzzed in his pocket.

Till glanced at the screen.

[Mizi] : *Hi Till, you should rest too... I know Ivan's fine now.*

He stared at the message for a moment. His thumb hovered above the keyboard.

Fine.

That word stung.

'Of course he's fine. Of course he is. You probably don't even know what he said to me last night.'

Till bit the inside of his cheek, a bitter laugh rising in his chest but never making it out.

He locked the screen without replying.

The road ahead felt longer than usual.

Till sat through his classes like he always did. Took notes, nodded when called, even managed to answer a question or two, especially in music or art class.

But his mind wasn't in the room.

It kept pulling him back to Ivan.

To that night.

To the way Ivan's voice cracked, eyes glassy, lips trembling like he was one breath away from crying. Like he was about to fall apart if Till said the wrong thing. The image clung to him—unshakable. Because even now, beneath the frustration, the anger, the bitterness… he still *cared*. He still remembered the weight of Ivan's body leaning against his.

His jaw tightened.

The professor's voice faded into a low hum. The words on the slides blurred. His pen stalled over the margin of his notebook.

He didn't notice Luka approaching, not until a light tap landed on his shoulder.

Till flinched.

When he turned, he was met with the same serene expression as always. Luka, the boy with golden hair that curled slightly at the ends, soft eyes like glass, and the presence of someone who belonged in a painting, not a classroom.

"What are you thinking?" Luka asked, voice like a warm tea. His tone laced with genuine curiosity, not nosiness, just… quiet concern.

Till blinked, still caught between memory and reality. "What?"

"Your brows are wrinkling again," Luka said, almost like an observation to himself.

His fingers brushed against Till's forehead—cold, elegant, featherlight. A gesture that felt out of place in this mundane space. It sent a chill down Till's spine.

For a heartbeat, his mind confused it for someone else.

Ivan.

Till slapped Luka's hand away. Not violently, but enough. He didn't even think about it.

Luka's hand dropped back to his side, unbothered. His face didn't even flinch. He simply looked at Till, eyes like soft glass, calm and unreadable.

"Why are you here?" Till asked, irritation bubbling.

"Comforting a friend," Luka replied, tone even, polite.

"We're not friends."

"You wound me," Luka murmured, his expression unchanged. "After the accident, I thought… we shared something."

Till said nothing. He had helped. That much was true. Yet, it didn't mean he trusted him.

Then Luka asked, "How's Ivan?"

Till clenched his fists beneath the desk.

“I don’t have the obligation to answer your questions,” he said sharply. “And don’t act like we’re close.”

There was no shift in Luka’s demeanor. Just the same calm stare, the same weightless presence, like a prince who knew his worth but never needed to prove it.

“Very well,” Luka said, voice soft. “But you looked like you were drowning. I only wanted to ask.”

Just like that, he stepped away, quiet as he came.

The next time Till saw him, the guilt had already curdled inside his chest, thick, unspoken, and sharp. He didn’t even know why he felt bad about the whole thing.

Luka didn’t seem hurt. He hadn’t looked offended or shaken when Till snapped at him. If anything, the blonde was unreadable, frustratingly composed in a way that only made Till feel more raw, more wrong. He had just stood there, still and quiet. Like he understood something Till didn’t.

Fuck, he thought, rubbing his temples.

It wasn’t Luka’s fault.

Till was just... stressed. Or maybe he was breaking. He didn’t even know the difference anymore.

So when he saw Luka again near the library steps, bathed in the warm gold of afternoon light, something pulled at him. He couldn’t just walk past him. He should. He really should. But his feet betrayed him, and before he could stop himself, he was already walking toward him, words tangled in his throat like they were trying to strangle him.

'Fuck. What was he even doing?'

Luka noticed him. His pale lashes lifted and he offered a small, patient smile, something close to a quiet welcome, though it didn’t reach his eyes.

Till stopped in front of him and blurted, “I need to talk to you.”

Luka simply nodded, calm as a still lake. “Alright.”

They walked, neither of them saying anything for a few minutes. The silence wasn’t comforting, it was thick and suffocating. The air between them was packed with tension Till didn’t know how to break.

"I— Sorry about the.. you know—"

There was a pause.

Finally, Till asked, “How did you know Ivan?”

Luka’s voice was effortless. “We’re usually partnered in class. He’s also my *hubae*.”

That made Till pause. Blink in surprise. “You’re… older?”

Luka tilted his head, smiling faintly. “Surprised?”

“I didn’t mean to be rud—”

“It’s fine,” Luka said easily. “So, why did you suddenly want to talk?”

Till exhaled hard, rubbing the back of his neck. “I don’t know, actually. It’s just…it’s hard. It’s hard to be patient.”

“You’re not the patient type,” Luka said, almost playfully.

Till shot him a glare. “Shut up.”

Luka snickered.

“I don’t know why the hell I’m telling you this man,” Till muttered, voice softer now, “but I keep on trying to be there for him. I really do. Yet… I don’t think it’s enough.”

Luka tilted his head slightly, thoughtful. “Did you tell him everything? The things you want to do with him, the things you feel?”

Till scoffed. “Of course. I mean, talking isn’t really my thing. But I tried. I keep trying. And he still shuts me down.”

“All in honesty?”

Till went quiet.

“Of course,” he mumbled eventually, avoiding Luka’s gaze.

“Then why are you hesitating?”

“I’m not, dude.”

“If that’s true,” Luka said softly, “look me in the eye.”

Till didn’t move.

Luka watched him carefully, expression unreadable once more. Then he spoke, not with judgment, but with a strange, cutting gentleness.

“Seems like you’re just as afraid as he is.”

That struck something. Till's face twisted with irritation.

"Shut up," he snapped. "You don't know anything about us."

"No," Luka said, unfazed. "But sometimes, side characters know more than the main ones."

Then he reached forward, one finger pressing lightly against Till's chest, just above the heart.

"Follow what's burning in here," Luka said, "not what fear tells you to silence."

It didn't sound like advice. It sounded like a quiet truth he'd learned the hard way.

That night, Till came home to the sound of his mother's trembling voice echoing through the hallway.

He didn't need to hear the words to know something was wrong. It was in the way she stood, still as a statue, her phone held in one shaking hand, her eyes wide with worry. The call had just ended.

"Till," she said, voice cracking. "The doctor called. It's about Ivan."

Ivan. Again. Always Ivan.

Their Ivan. The one everyone talked about. The one who filled every

room, every silence, every goddamn corner of his life. Ivan here. Ivan there. Ivan in his mother's mouth, in his dreams, in his thoughts, everywhere he turned.

“Not now, Mom,” he muttered, walking past her.

“He had a seizure last night,” she said quickly, voice rising slightly. “The single pill he took—”

“I said not now.”

But she followed, her eyes full of panic. “Till—listen to me. He’s your friend, isn’t he? Aren’t you worried?”

“I don’t have the energy to listen to this crap,” Till said, louder this time, his voice shaking at the edges.

“If this continues, he’ll die,” she whispered. “Ivan will—”

“Then let him die!” Till screamed.

The words tore from his throat, violent and raw, louder than he intended. Louder than he had ever dared.

“That’s what he fucking wanted, right?! Isn’t that what he’s been asking for this whole damn time?”

"You think I'd care?!"

His voice bounced off the walls like a thunderclap. His mother froze.

Her hand slowly rose to her mouth, eyes wide and glistening.

“Till…” she whispered, trembling. “How… how could you say that?”

He couldn’t answer. Couldn’t look at her.

Till's breath hitched. He stood there, breath shaking, his chest aching with something he couldn’t name. Rage, grief, helplessness? All of them?

She looked at him like she didn’t recognize him. Like she was seeing a stranger, or worse, a ghost she’d tried to bury.

And then it hit him. The volume. The tone. The venom in his voice.

It was him. His father. The one they escaped. The monster who shouted so hard the windows would rattle. The man who made his mother flinch every time she dropped a spoon.

Till saw the same fear in her eyes now, and it made his stomach churn.

He didn’t say anything. Just walked past her. The weight in his chest too heavy, too sharp. His vision blurred. His throat ached.

He locked himself in his room and collapsed onto the floor, fingers digging into the carpet.

'What the fuck am I becoming?'

He buried his face into his arms. His voice had been his father's. His anger had been his father's. That same fury, that same cruelty, he'd worn it like a second skin without realizing it.

And his mom… his sweet, broken mother who had stitched him back together so many times, he'd torn another wound into her.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, barely audible.

"Sorry..," again.

He didn't even know who he was apologizing to anymore.

His mom, for yelling.

Ivan, for giving up.

Himself, for being too weak to do anything but break everything he touched.

Till didn't leave his room. Not even when the sun had long set and darkness painted every corner of the house in deep blues and blacks.

He sat on the edge of his bed, hunched forward, elbows digging into his knees, his hands tangled tightly in his hair. The silence was so loud it screamed in his ears. He hadn't moved for what felt like hours. The walls seemed to close in around him, heavy with the weight of everything unsaid and everything said too late.

A knock sounded on the door again.

"Till," his mother's voice came through, barely a whisper this time. "Dear… please. Eat something, at least."

But he didn't answer. Afraid to do so.

Afraid that If he opened his mouth, he'd scream again. And he was terrified of hearing himself scream like that a second time.

His throat still ached from it, the earlier fight with Io. Not even a fight. Just him, unleashing every raw, jagged part of himself, every word sharpened like a knife and thrown at the only person who ever stayed by his side.

He could still hear her gasp. Could still see the way she stepped back like he'd hit her.

And he hated himself for it.

That wasn't who he was.

That wasn't who he was supposed to be.

But—

God, he sounded just like him.

He'd grown up with it.

That voice. That rage. That unpredictable, shattering presence that turned their house into a battlefield. Till had memorized the sound of doors slamming, fists hitting walls, his mother crying so quietly behind locked doors he thought she disappeared.

He told himself every day:

"I will never be like him."

He swore it.

But tonight, when Io looked at him with wide, frightened eyes—like she was staring at a ghost—he knew.

Knew.

He already was.

He squeezed his eyes shut. "No," he whispered under his breath. "Fuck. No."

But denying it didn't make it less true.

Something sick curled in his gut. He sat up suddenly, the quiet too

loud to bear. He needed something, anything to make it stop.

Water. Maybe water.

He dragged himself into the hallway, his body sluggish, like he'd aged years in a few hours. The kitchen was dim, lit only by the blue of the refrigerator light. He poured himself a glass, but his hands wouldn't stop trembling.

He turned—

And saw her.

His mother stood a few feet away, watching him. Not sternly. Not judging. Just watching, like a mother watches a wounded child who doesn't know how to ask for help.

"Till?" she said softly. Her voice was laced with worry, but there was a gentleness in it that made something inside him ache.

"Are you ready… to listen now?"

He didn't answer right away. But his eyes met hers. And that was enough.

They sat in the quiet kitchen, across from each other. The clock ticked on the wall. The fridge hummed. Outside, the wind moved through the trees. But between them, there was only stillness.

Io exhaled slowly. “The doctor called again. I didn’t want to push you earlier… but…”

She paused. Till waited, afraid of what he already sensed.

“There were no other contacts. His parents—” she shook her head. “They aren’t answering. No one is. That’s why the hospital turned to me. Because they couldn’t reach anyone else.”

Till’s fingers curled into fists on the table. He said nothing.

“Ivan… is in a coma now,” she finally said.

His breath caught.

She continued carefully, her voice shaking but still steady enough to bear the truth.

“The single drug he took—wasn’t just some suppressant. The toxins it contains are eating his insides." Io took a deep breath.

"He didn't told you any of these?"

Till’s face didn’t move, but his jaw clenched so tight it ached. His whole body trembled, barely restrained. He didn’t know if it was from fear, rage, or the crushing weight of sorrow, maybe all three.

“But for now,” she continued, voice gentler now, “he’s stable. He’s breathing. He’s… fighting.”

Something shifted in Till’s chest, like a thread pulled too tight suddenly snapping. *Breathing,* he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding his own breath until then. A sharp gasp escaped him, like a diver surfacing from depths too dark, too long.

He’s still breathing.

Fighting. Ivan was still fighting.

And what did Till do?

He *walked away.*

He said—

He said *let him die.*

The guilt hit him like a freight train, no warning, no mercy. It shredded through him, jagged and merciless, like broken glass lodged in his throat and lungs.

Tills eyes stung. He blinked furiously, shaking his head as if he could push the tears away by force. He couldn’t cry. Not here. Not in front of her. Not when he didn’t deserve to.

But Io didn’t speak. She rose silently and stepped around the table, her

face quiet with grief and love. She knelt beside him and reached out with hands that had once cradled him as a child, fingers soft and steady.

She touched his face, so gently it undid him. As if he were something fragile. Something breakable.

“Shhh…” she said softly. “It’s okay. Shhh… it’s okay.”

And when her arms wrapped around him, Till didn’t resist. He didn't pull away. He couldn’t. The moment her warmth touched him, he collapsed, body folding in on itself like a dam breaking after years of pressure.

The first sob ripped from his chest like something being torn out. Raw, aching. He clung to her with shaking arms, burying his face into her shoulder, his voice breaking against her skin.

“Sorry,” he choked out. “Sorry… I didn’t mean it… I didn’t—”

“I know,” she whispered, cradling his face, pressing kisses into his temple. “I know, sweetheart.”

“I didn’t mean it, Mom. I was just so fucking angry. I thought—I didn’t know he was in that *much* pain.” His voice broke again, shaking. “No, I think I know. But—And now he’s—now he’s—”

"I'm a horrible person, Mom."

“Maybe I’m just like *him*,” he said, voice a whisper. “Maybe I really am.”

Io shook her head, “You’re not.”

“You didn’t see me earlier,” he said, bitter. “I looked at you and I saw him. I felt him.”

He swallowed hard.

“I made you cry.."

Io rocked him, like she used to when he was little and the world felt too big.

And all Till could do was say it again and again, his voice raw, nearly silent—

“Sorry… sorry… I didn’t mean it… I’m sorry…”

He didn’t know who he was saying it to anymore.

To Ivan.

To himself.

To his mother, for hurting her with his anger.

To the boy who once smiled at him under the sun.

He just kept saying it. Hoping that somehow, someone—anyone, could hear it.

And forgive him.

She held him tighter, hand stroking the back of his head, whispering, “Shhh… it’s okay.”

But it wasn’t okay. He didn’t feel okay.

Because the boy who's lying in a hospital bed, slipping further away. And all Till could think about was how the last thing Ivan might ever remember…

Was him. Those words.

And the words he wished he could take back.

Chapter End Notes

Tilly, you're not a monster, okay?

The remaining chapters will be longer than usual

I'm getting emotional because this fic is actually getting more attention than I expected, and honestly, thank you so much for that.

I promise I won’t disappoint you with the ending, so please be ready. Again we’re so close to the end now.

I saw someone's comment that they were binge-reading this, eheheheeh and asked if Hyuna will be in the story, don’t worry,

she will hehe. She'll be showing up soon.

I'll probably update again tomorrow. To be honest, I've changed a lot of scenes and even the overall plot HAHAHA. I'll tell you what the original plot was when the ending comes.

I hope y'all will read my long yappings when that time comes too. And I really hope you'll stay with me 'till the end. (Till mentioned? *gasp*)

Also, if you're confused about anything or have any questions at all, feel free to ask.

Chapter 23: A club

Chapter Summary

> “We’ve been practicing a lot. We’ve got this thing, this band. ALNST. Don’t ask me what it means, no one really explains it,” he added with a grin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Another weeks passed.

Till counted them not in days but in guilt.

Each morning started with his mother’s soft voice at the door: “He’s still asleep..”

Each night ended with Till lying in bed, eyes wide open, his chest tight, as if someone was sitting on it.

He hadn’t gone back.

Not once.

His mother had. Every few days, she would come home with bags under her eyes and gentle updates he couldn’t bear to hear. She’d leave food outside his door and knock once. Sometimes she’d sit beside him on the couch, never saying much—just rubbing slow circles into his back like she used to when he was little and couldn’t sleep after hearing their father rage downstairs.

He hated this feeling.

The version of himself he was now.

He avoided everyone. Sua and Mizi had called, texted, tried to stop by, but he never answered. His phone screen was a cemetery of missed calls and unopened messages. Just seeing Mizi's name felt like a blade twisting in his chest. She didn't know what he had done. Not really.

He imagined her bright chartreuse eyes dimming when she heard.

He couldn't handle that.

One night, while his mom was heating soup he'd never eat, she sat across from him and said softly,

"My son is not the type to run away, right?"

Till didn't answer.

He didn't have to. She already knew.

She gave him a tired smile and said, "He's waiting. I think he always has been."

And that night, something inside him finally cracked. It splintered, slow and jagged, like glass giving way under pressure.

The next morning, with shaking fingers, Till bought a bouquet of violet tulips.

He remembered why.

Ivan had smiled like a fool the first time he saw them. Spun around with them tucked behind his ear, saying something dumb like,

“Do I look poetic now?” and laugh.

Like a fool.

Till had rolled his eyes back then and flicked his forehead, but secretly he had stared a little longer than he meant to.

The hospital hall was too white. Too quiet. The air cold enough to sink into his bones. When he reached the door, his fingers hovered over the handle for too long. The metal felt too heavy.

|Room 089|

He stood in front of the door longer than necessary. His knuckles hovered. He didn’t knock.

Coward, he whispered to himself.

Then he opened the door.

The smell of antiseptic hit first. Then the beep, steady, slow, mocking. The room was dim but sterile, like even warmth had been scrubbed out. The TV was off. The heart monitor beeped slow and steady, the only sound anchoring the room in time.

The first thing he saw was the vase of roses in the corner, pink, but wilted now, bent over like they were grieving too. Like they had waited too long for something that never came.

He walked inside, careful. Like even the floor might shatter if he moved too fast.

He swapped the roses with the violet tulips he brought. Arranged them like Ivan would've, clumsy but full of care.

Then his eyes fell on the letters. Dozens of them, placed on the table beside Ivan's bed. Some with hearts, some folded in thick cardstock envelopes. Some typed, some scrawled in messy handwriting.

Classmates. Fans. Probably Mizi's. So many were probably from her.

He didn't touch them. Just stared.

And then, finally, his gaze went to the bed.

And nothing in him was prepared for this.

Ivan looked…

Ivan looked like he was vanishing.

So pale, his lips almost blue. His cheeks hollowed out. Hair slightly overgrown, framing his face like a fading portrait.

Dark circles sat under his eyes. He didn't look peaceful. He looked

tired. Even unconscious, he looked like he was still fighting to exist.

Like a ghost.

Till's knees nearly gave out.

He clutched the edge of the bed and slowly, so slowly, sat beside him. He stared at Ivan's hands for a long time before reaching out.

He remembered those hands. Always moving. Always expressive. Strong but not rough, fidgeting with pens, tugging at his collar, flicking sunflower seeds at his face while grinning like a menace.

But now… the skin was thin, cold. Bones pronounced.

He was afraid touching them would break something.

Still, he held them.

They were cold.

"I bought you these," Till muttered, touching the tulips down beside the bed like he was placing it. "You like them, right? The violet ones."

He scoffed under his breath.

"Dumbass. Who even smiles that hard at flowers…"

His throat tightened.

"I saw you once. Holding them, grinning like an idiot. You looked so... stupid."

He pulled the chair close, sat stiffly. His knees bounced like he wanted to run. But he didn't. Couldn't.

He reached for Ivan's hand slowly, and gently wrapped his fingers around it. It felt lighter than it should be. His thumb brushed over the scar near the base of Ivan's palm.

"…You're thinner."

His voice cracked.

He took a shaky breath and rested his elbows on the edge of the bed, still clutching Ivan's hand like it was the only thing anchoring him.

"Hey… I'm here."

His voice cracked.

"Did you wait long?"

He paused, the silence swallowing his words. Then, slowly, he lowered his head and whispered,

"I was wrong."

It came out rough. Bitter. Like it tasted bad in his mouth.

“That night, when I said those things… I didn’t mean all of it. I didn’t mean—fuck, I didn’t mean most of it. I was angry, and scared, and I thought you’d already left me behind."

"I don’t know what the hell I was thinking. No, that’s a lie. I do.”

He let out a dry laugh. It didn’t sound like a laugh at all.

“I keep pretending I understand you. But I don’t. I don’t get it, Ivan. I tried. I really fucking tried. But you… you’re always just a little out of reach.”

His eyes flicked to the tulips, then back to Ivan’s still face.

“I thought I was helping you. That I was being good to you. But all I did was make it worse, didn’t I?”

His jaw clenched.

“I wasn’t there for you the way I should’ve been. I said things that made you feel like you weren’t enough. Like you were a burden. And that’s on me.”

He inhaled sharply and lowered his head.

“You’re not selfish.. You're not.”

There was a long, heavy silence. The machines beside him beeped in a slow, steady rhythm, mocking how still he was.

“God, Ivan…”

A tremor laced his voice as he leaned closer.

“Can you hear me? I hope you don’t, you asshole. This is humiliating.”

He pressed his face into the bedsheet, voice muffled and shaking.

When he spoke again, it was raw. Every word scraped its way out of his throat.

“I’d do anything. I’d—fuck, I’d get on my knees if it meant you’d just wake up. Tell me to shut up. Call me a wimp. I don't care."

His fingers tightened around Ivan’s hand.

“I don’t care who you love. Forget him. Forget the guy you couldn’t stop thinking about. I won’t even ask. I won’t say shit. You want me to be quiet, I will. You want space, fine. You want someone to scream at, I’m right here.”

He wiped his face with the back of his hand roughly.

"I too am desperate.."

Desperate.

“I’ll change. I’ll try. I’ll be less of a dick. Be someone you can lean on. I’ll figure it out. Just…”

He swallowed.

“Just don’t leave.”

His voice dropped to a whisper.

“Don’t leave me behind.”

He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the rough, callused skin of Ivan’s hand. It tasted like dust. Like regret.

“…I missed you." the words barely came out, as if Till was afraid Ivan would hear it—afraid to admit it, even to himself.

He sat like that for a while. Just breathing. Just listening to that steady beep. Like a metronome of borrowed time.

He imagined Ivan grinning. Calling him dramatic. Flicking his ear. Saying something like *“You love me, admit it already.”*
And Till would’ve thrown a pillow at him.

He smiled faintly through tears.

"…Don't make me wait long, okay?"

He stood. Slowly. Carefully. Like leaving too fast would break the illusion.

He looked back once before he opened the door.

"I'll come again," he said. "I promise."

And then he left, tulip petals still trembling in the glass beside the bed.

Till began to show up. Not just in the hospital, but in life.

He started trying. Not perfectly. Not loudly. But… quietly. Every morning, he'd wake up, brush his teeth, make his bed, and eat breakfast. Small things. Things he hadn't done consistently in a month.

He started a good routine.

For his mom.

For everyone who had been worrying about her, about him.

For himself.

And for Ivan.

He visited the hospital almost every day now.

Sometimes, he brought flowers. Other times, coffee for the nurses. But *always*, he brought his voice. He'd sit beside Ivan's bed, same spot, same chair, and talk like Ivan was there. Like he was listening.

"Today was tiring," he'd say, stretching his legs out with a sigh. "Sua said I should cut my hair because I look homeless."

Or:

"There was this cat outside the studio today. Looked like you. Real bastard energy."

Sometimes, he'd bring his sketchbook and draw while talking. Sometimes, he'd read aloud from Ivan's favorite cheesy romance manga, putting on terrible voices until the nurse stifled a laugh in the hallway.

But there were days he didn't talk at all.

Just… sat there.

And *stared*.

At Ivan's chest rising and falling. At the corner of his lips that never

smiled anymore. At the thick silence that filled every space between them.

He'd stay until the room started to dim with evening light. Until visiting hours ended and the nurse gently reminded him to go.

And then… he'd promise, "I'll be back tomorrow."

His mother noticed. Of course she did.

She didn't say much, just smiled more, cooked warm meals again, left a towel in front of the bathroom before he could even ask.

Once, she kissed his temple and whispered—

"I'm proud of you."

It made him freeze. But he didn't pull away.

It was Luka who introduced him to her.

Till had been practicing alone in the small soundproof room at the back of the music building. The guitar felt natural in his hands but no one really knew he played. No one except his mom. And… Ivan.

His fingers plucked at the strings. A slow melody. Sad. Simple. A song he hadn't named. Maybe never would.

When the last note faded, he heard it—

A voice, warm and amused, just outside the door.

“You’ve got more talent than I thought.”

He turned sharply.

Standing at the threshold was a tall woman with dark skin and long, glossy black hair that framed her face like a curtain. She wore a loose denim jacket over a cropped shirt, her posture lazy, confident, like she owned the world and didn’t need permission.

Her grin was slow, teasing.

“I’m Hyuna,” she said, then, without waiting, walked right in and wrapped an arm around his shoulders like they were old friends.

Till blinked, stiff as a board.

She laughed. “That’s why Luka introduced me to you. He said, ‘This guy hides his voice like it’s a damn state secret.’ He wasn’t wrong.”

“I don’t— I’m not—” he started to protest.

But she ignored him, pulling him closer to the soundboard. “You’ve got a good ear. But the way you sing? That ache in it? That’s rare, man. You’re joining.”

“Joining what?”

“Our band. Small club. College stuff. We need another vocalist.”

“I’m not—”

“You are now.”

And somehow… that was that.

Till started going. At first, he kept to the back, awkward, unsure. But Hyuna made space. Luka gave him the easy songs. And then, one day, they handed him the mic.

He sang.

He transitioned fluidly—so fluidly from low, breathy murmurs to intense falsettos that sent chills down everyone’s spine. His falsetto was haunting, light, ethereal, and raw, as if the sound was barely tethered to his body. A voice that could both burn and bleed.

He knew exactly when to hold back and when to break free, dragging tension out of a verse before snapping it in a scream that didn’t lose control, but didn’t pretend to be okay either.

There was something feral in it. Something cracked.
Like he wasn’t just singing.

He was surviving.

After the song, there was a pause. Then someone clapped. Then another.

Then Hyuna said, “Holy shit. Who hurt you babe?”

Hyuna described it best after one practice:
“You sound like someone singing through a heart that's already been torn out."

He scoffed. “That’s a bit dramatic."

She grinned. “Am I wrong?”

That night, they made it official.

Till became the other vocalist of the band.

The band played everything. Angry punk. Soft acoustic. Gritty rock. Melancholic synth. Pop that was barely holding itself together. Screams that melted into whispers. Joy that turned into mourning mid-song.

It was… versatile.

So was Till.

He adapted, molded himself around every sound, every tempo. There were nights he exploded on stage, veins straining, voice cracking from intensity, and others where he barely breathed the lyrics out like they might shatter if he tried too hard.

And around him… the band formed like a storm.

Hyuna danced with her microphone like it was a natural part of her body. She moved like sound, it was wild, charismatic, bold. Her voice was rough and grounded, smoke with a spark, an earthy contrast to Till's sharp, celestial tone. Together, they harmonized like fire meeting fog.

Then there was Isaac.

Another guitarist. Tall, though not the tallest. Always in black, especially jackets that looked like they held secrets. Quiet off-stage, but steady. Calm, collected. He had a dry sense of humor, the kind that slid under the noise and made you laugh two seconds later. A big brother type, observant, protective, always there when it counted.

On stage, he played like the guitar was part of his heartbeat. Long solos. Dramatic bridges. Riffs that didn't just echo, they lifted Till's voice, built it up like scaffolding under something holy.

And then there was Dewey—

Their drummer.

The tallest of them all, and somehow still the loudest. Buzzed hair. Sunglasses always on, even in the dimmest rooms. He moved like he was plugged into a live wire—tapping, bouncing, spinning sticks through his fingers, drumming on any surface that dared to be still. He shouted jokes, laughed like a siren, filled every room like a one-man riot.

His energy was a storm with rhythm. Chaotic, but in the best, most exhilarating way.

Hyuna would groan, “Dewey, tone it down—”

And Dewey would throw his arms in the air and shout, “I AM toned down!”

They all fit.

Even Luka, who never played or sang but somehow managed to be everywhere. Calm, observant, always standing with a drink in hand and a knowing little smile like he was five steps ahead of the rest of them.

He never praised directly. Just raised an eyebrow and said, “Not bad.”

But for Till, that was enough.

Enough for him to Till smile.

He smiled so long that his cheeks ached.

He laughed so hard he had to wipe tears from his eyes.

He looked in the mirror and didn't hate what he saw.

At practice one night, Hyuna nudged him.

"You're not bad, you know. Even when you're emo."

He rolled his eyes. "Shut up."

"No, really. You look less haunted lately."

He smirked, then shrugged.

"I'm trying."

She grinned. "Keep trying. It suits you."

Maybe… it did.

The sun was setting when Till stepped into Ivan's room, a bouquet of daffodils in hand. He sat down in the usual chair beside the hospital bed, brushing his bangs back with one hand as he leaned in. Ivan looked the same. Peaceful in a way that was both comforting and cruel. Tubes still in his arm. Machines still breathing for him.

“So I joined a club,” he said, a faint smile pulling at the corner of his lips. “A band, actually. Well, someone forced me. And maybe… maybe I have friends now?”

He smiled. Really smiled. Not the forced kind, not the guilty kind. His voice trembled with excitement.

“There’s Hyuna, she’s intense. Loud. But in the best way. Kind of like she’s been through a lot but still shines. You’d like her. And Dewey, he’s a menace.”

He chuckled. “He plays the drums like he’s summoning the end of the world. Isaac is cool too, he treats me like a kid thought..”

His fingers idly tapped against his thigh as he spoke, his smile never fading.

“We’ve been practicing a lot. We’ve got this thing, this band. **ALNST**. Don’t ask me what it means, no one really explains it,” he added with a grin.

He went quiet for a moment, eyes softening as he stared at Ivan’s sleeping face. His smile lingered, but it had shifted, something more hollow, more tender.

“I wish you were there,” he whispered.

Right then, his phone vibrated. The screen lit up— **[CALL INCOMING: MIZI]** . He stared for a second before picking up.

He answered with a small smile, “Hey.”

“Did you already forget about us?” Mizi’s cheerful voice teased on the other end.

“Of course not,” Till said, voice warming. “Actually… we’ve got a mini-concert. I want you to come. You and Sua.”

Mizi squealed, loud enough that he had to pull the phone slightly away from his ear. “YES! YES! YES! WHEN? WHERE? TELL ME EVERYTHING RIGHT NOW—”

Till laughed more genuinely, giving her the details, the time and place. His voice cracked a little near the end, nerves leaking through. “I’m actually… kind of freaking out.”

“You? You’re gonna be great,” she promised.

But when the call ended, and he was left alone in that sterile room again, the weight came back. The nerves hadn’t vanished, they’d simply hidden.

The club was packed. Lights low, stage set. Warm yellow spotlights glared down from the ceiling, casting dramatic shadows. The buzz of voices filled the air, the soft murmurs of anticipation building in his gut like thunder.

Till adjusted his mic, palms clammy. His heart felt like it was trying to beat its way out of his ribs.

“You okay?” Hyuna asked, leaning toward him. Her voice was calm, but her eyes were sharp. Present. Solid.

He nodded, exhaling. “It’s different… when you’re really up here. With strangers staring at you. A whole room. It’s not like practice.”

Hyuna placed a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t be like this."

"Like what?" Till asked, visibly confused.

“Shrinking. Let it out, Till. They’re here to see us.” Her smirk was sharp but comforting. “This is your moment.”

The lights dimmed.

The crowd quieted.

And then Dewey hit the drums.

A loud, cracking beat filled the room, sharp and fast like a war drum, snapping the audience into motion. The sound rattled in Till’s chest. Isaac’s guitar hummed alive, rising with electricity.

The song was called '**ALL-IN**'.

Lights swept over the crowd.

The show had begun.

Hyuna started first, grounded and bold, stepping into the spotlight with her voice steady and rich.

Hwaryeohan deungjang-e nuni keojigo Simjangi ttwineun geoya OK

Then Till came in, voice almost a whisper before lifting like smoke, his falsetto haunting, fragile, but cutting straight through the heavy pulse of drums.

Together, their voices collided.

Her steady force. His shivering, aching ascent.

She was the anchor.

He was the storm.

Jeomjeomdeo keojineun noraessorideullyeo Seonguneul chaewobwa

He moved, eyes closed, chest heaving with each note. Every word was soaked in something more than performance, it was lived emotion, bleeding through him. When he hit the chorus, his voice cracked, beautifully—raw and jagged in a way that only Till could make beautiful.

Useobwa hey, kick and break ya—Bichnaneun eunhareul hwanghae chi—cheers

He opened his eyes.

Scanning the crowd. Desperate for something familiar. For grounding.

He found Mizi.

Her bright pink hair shone even under dim lights and bouncing as she waved at him, eyes sparkling. Sua stood beside her, arms crossed but smiling. Till smiled, grateful, yes—but…

Nothing stirred inside his chest.

There were no butterflies.

No flutter.

No pulse speeding up.

He didn't feel what he thought he was supposed to feel. What he used to feel.

Mizi was beautiful. Sweet. Kind. Gentle.

She had always been light.

But…

Why was he still searching?

Why, when he already knew the person he really wanted to see could

never be in this crowd?

He looked up again anyway.

Mizi waved harder, delighted. Her smile was genuine, radiant. And he smiled back, softer this time.

Modu bakkulgeoya nan naegae all-in

The song neared its end.

Till's voice burst out one final time, shaking with everything he had. His legs were unsteady, shirt damp with sweat. Every muscle in his body burned, but damn—it felt good. It felt like living.

Sinnage dallyeo achimkkaji, don't stop—!

And then the music stopped.

Till threw his whole body into the last note, eyes squeezed shut, sweat dripping from his temples. His chest rose and fell with each breath, the silence after the final chord stretching on just a second too long.

He stood there, chest heaving, blinking beneath the lights.

The crowd was silent.

His stomach dropped.

Was it bad? Did he mess it up?

He turned, confused, breath catching in his throat.

But before his thoughts could spiral further—

"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—!"

The crowd exploded.

Thunderous cheers erupted like waves crashing down, roaring into his ears and across the walls. People were on their feet. Some were screaming. Others were clapping so hard it hurt to hear.

Till just stood there, stunned.

Out of breath.

But smiling.

The roar of the crowd wasn't fading. If anything, it was getting louder—building. A sea of arms waved in the air, hands clapping above heads, voices hoarse with enthusiasm. The lights from phones shimmered like stars in the dark room, pulsing with every chant, every scream.

"ALNST! ALNST! ALNST!"

Till could barely register the moment. His heart thundered, the adrenaline not letting up. His breath caught when suddenly—

An arm wrapped around his neck.

It tugged him in close.

Hyuna, glowing with sweat and energy, had that feral grin on her face again. Her eyes sparkled like she'd seen the future and had already won.

She winked at him. "I told you."

Her voice was husky from singing, but still strong as she brought her mic to her mouth, shouting over the thunder of applause.

"THANK YOU FOR COMING!!"

Cheers echoed in return.

"Seriously—thank you all!" she laughed, chest heaving. "We're ALNST, and this—this here's our newest vocalist!"

She looked at him, gave him a gentle push forward.

"Step up, Till!"

The lights shifted, focusing. The moment took shape like a dream.

He stumbled a little into the spotlight, eyes wide, unsure what to do with his hands. But before he could speak, the crowd ignited again.

“TILL! TILL! TILL! TILL!”

His name rippled through the room like fire, burning through the static in his chest. He stood frozen for a beat—then slowly, slowly, he smiled. Broad and real. The kind of smile that came from deep, deep down. The kind of smile he hadn’t worn in so long it almost hurt.

Behind him, Hyuna shouted one last time into her mic, riding the final wave of applause.

“We’ll see you next week!”

The stage lights flared one last time—

Backstage was chaos—but the best kind of chaos.

The moment they stepped off the stage, it was like an explosion of energy. Dewey let out a loud whoop, throwing his drumsticks into the air and catching them with the ease of a showman.

He grabbed Till in a crushing side-hug and bounced in place like a child on a sugar rush.

“That was sick! SICK! Did you see the crowd?!”

Isaac leaned against the wall, grinning from ear to ear, wiping sweat from his neck with a towel.

“You killed it, Till. No kidding. You actually killed it.”

Till was breathless, face flushed, hair damp and clinging to his forehead. His eyes glittered with excitement and disbelief, and he kept laughing softly to himself, like he was trying to convince his own body that all of it had really just happened. That it was real.

Hyuna, still glowing with energy, didn’t let go of him—her arm slung around his neck as if anchoring him in the moment. She laughed and leaned on him like they were drunk on adrenaline. Till found himself laughing too, body still trembling from the rush.

And then—

“Good job.”

Luka appeared from the far end of the room, calm as always, a bottle of water in one hand and a clean towel in the other. He walked straight up to Hyuna, gave her a small nod, and gently wiped the sweat off her forehead and places that's.. *hmn*.. with the towel. His movements were unhurried, natural.

And somehow… too intimate.

Till blinked. Something in his brain fizzed.

His mouth moved before he could stop it.

“Isn’t he a little too close to you?”

The words hung in the air.

The room went dead silent.

Even Dewey froze mid-jump, blinking like a confused cat.

Then—

Hyuna burst out laughing, loud and unfiltered, clutching her stomach as if it physically hurt.

She looked at Till, her eyes wide with amusement. “He’s my partner, you idiot.”

“...Huh?” Till blinked again. His stomach dropped.

She grinned and added, “Like, my actual partner. We’ve been dating since high school.”

“You didn’t know?” Isaac asked, looking amused.

“No,” Till muttered, face burning.

“Anddd Luka’s a recessive Alpha,” Hyuna added casually. “I’m a Beta. Not that it matters, really, but you looked like you were about to challenge him to a duel or something.”

Till swore in his head. *Fuck.*

The realization hit him like a truck. Right—he’d only just learned about everyone’s second gender recently. It hadn’t even sunk in yet. Back when they first met, nobody brought it up. No one made it a point. They just were. They were loud, expressive, chaotic, supportive—his band, his friends.

Or.. maybe he wasn't paying attention.

He tried to laugh it off, but the sound came out all strangled. Isaac and Dewey were dying behind him, practically gasping for air, leaning on each other like drunkards.

“Oh man—Till, you should’ve seen your face!”

“You looked ready to fight for her honor, medieval-style.”

“I hate all of you,” Till buried his face in his hands and groaned, but he was smiling despite himselphon

After that night, the momentum didn’t stop.

They played more gigs—small at first, college bars, local festivals, even a live session streamed online. But something caught on. The rawness of their sound, the chemistry between their voices, the way ALNST didn’t try to be polished—they were just honest.

People loved it.

Their name began to spread. Posters started to appear on campus walls. Students asked for selfies. Professors even mentioned them.

Till kept singing. Kept performing.

But he never stopped visiting the hospital.

Sometimes he’d go straight from rehearsal, sweat still clinging to his skin. Sometimes he’d bring leftovers from a celebration meal the others insisted on treating him to. Sometimes he had nothing—just himself.

He sat by Ivan’s side.

Talked to him like he always had.

Told him about Hyuna’s terrible jokes. About Dewey’s horrible flirting. About Isaac's crush on the principal. How Luka once fell asleep standing up. He talked about the nerves, the laughs, the stage lights, the weird things fans said online.

He never said everything he wanted to. But he said a lot.

And one evening—after a show, after the adrenaline had faded and the quiet set in—he looked down at Ivan's still form and whispered.

"I want to write a song."

His voice cracked.

"I think… I want to write one just for..."

Till felt a different kind of tremble in his chest. Not nerves. Not stage fright.

But the beginning of something honest.

Till had never written anything like this before.

He wasn't even sure what this was. Who it was for. Or why it pulled at him with such a stubborn ache.

It started with a hum—just a simple melody that haunted the corners of his mind like a ghost refusing to be exorcised. Sometimes it came in the morning, drifting in the steam of his coffee. Other times, it hit him while walking home alone, wind in his hair, heart full and empty at

once. The tune wrapped around him like a whisper he couldn't shake off.

And so, he wrote.

Every day, between exhaustion and practice, between school and rehearsals, between laughter with friends and quiet commutes home, he scribbled in pieces. Bits of lines on the edges of receipts, the backs of worksheets, the corners of napkins.

At first, it didn't make sense.

But it didn't need to.

He studied. He practiced. He laughed with Isaac and Hyuna. Performed with ALNST in crammed spaces packed with strangers.

Then he came home. And wrote.

He wrote on the stairs of the clubroom, sometimes between guitar tuning. He jotted lines down during lunch breaks, humming quietly to himself with earbuds in.

Days passed.

Nights blurred into morning.

Sleep became something rare.

But the words came. Slowly. Softly.

One line at a time.

Allow me to the tips of your fingers.

He'd written that sitting under a vending machine glow, sipping canned coffee past midnight.

Allow me to the ends of your feet.

That line came while lying flat on the floor of his room, eyes closed, feeling like his soul had spilled out of his ribcage and onto the wood.

Dissolve me in your gaze.

He whispered it to himself while watching the rain outside the bus window. His pen scratched the fogged glass, tracing it out.

I don't want to let you go.

His eyes stung writing that one.

He didn’t know why.

Let me drown in you.

It was written at the corner of his desk at 3:42 a.m. The clock ticked too loud. His heart even louder.

Read my soul.

He scrawled it down without breathing.

Yes, my soul.

His hand trembled when he finished that line.

Two weeks. That’s how long it took. Two weeks of raw, sleepless obsession. Two weeks of chasing down a feeling he couldn’t name. Two weeks of pouring pieces of himself into a melody that still wouldn’t leave him.

He didn’t have a title.

But the song—whatever it was—was starting to live and breathe.

He was working on it again one rainy evening, seated by the open window of the clubroom. The scent of petrichor wafted in, damp and familiar. He had a cup of warm coffee beside him, lyrics scattered on sheets that fluttered with every gust.

Then—

His phone rang.

The sound made him jump.

He glanced at the screen.

It was Ivan’s doctor.

His blood turned to ice.

He answered with trembling fingers, heart hammering in his chest.

The voice on the other end was calm. Too calm. And that calmness—it cut through Till sharper than panic ever could.

The conversation was a blur—snatches of sentences, clinical terms he didn’t process, a name repeated again and again. His name.

His mind went blank.

His heart dropped to the floor.

Then the line went dead.

His hand, still holding the phone, slowly dropped to the table. He'd knocked over his coffee. It spilled fast, seeping across the table, bleeding into the paper.

Pages inked with days of soul—and soaked them completely. Lyrics smudging, disappearing into soft grey pools.

He didn't even flinch.

Didn't even try to save them.

He left everything else behind.

Till didn't remember the ride there.

Didn't remember the way his shoes slapped against the pavement or how the bus jolted with every stop. The rain had come down in soft sheets, soaking through his sleeves and hair as he ran under flickering streetlights.

The city was a blur of headlights and passing strangers, of umbrellas and grey skies, of the sound of his own breathing. He couldn't feel the cold—only the steady, rising pressure in his chest, like a dam about to

break.

The elevator ride was quiet.

Too quiet.

His reflection in the metal door was pale. Wide-eyed. A little lost.

He blinked at himself and saw the boy who had once hummed a nameless melody in the dark, aching for someone who couldn't come.

The hallway smelled of disinfectant and rain-soaked tile.

Each step toward the room was deliberate—hesitant, like walking through a memory he wasn’t ready to face.

|Room 089|

The numbers were small, stamped in silver, quiet against the soft beige of the wall.

His hand reached out before he could think.

He held it there, as if his body knew that on the other side, something would break. Something would change.

With a soft breath, and everything inside him braced tight—

He opened the door.

Gently.

Chapter End Notes

I honestly don’t know what to say right now, ahaha, I crammed this whole thing. So… here we are.

Also, quick disclaimer: I’m not a singer.. So if the narrative felt off at any point, that’s on me. My apologies.

Now! your choice:
Red pill: Ivan wakes up.
Blue pill: Ivan dies.

Lmao, how many times I made y'alls heart almost explode because of these cliffhangers? Kekekeke. How many times I made Till and Ivan run for their lives? Welp. Anyways, 2 chapters to go!

Chapter 24: Let Down

Chapter Summary

> At first, Till couldn’t see clearly. His eyes refused to adjust, or maybe his mind refused to believe it. It was a silhouette. A figure formed of bones and soft light, a small mountain of blankets pulled gently to the waist. The figure sat so still, so eerily motionless, that Till almost believed he’d imagined it.

Chapter Notes

> ‼️READ AT YOUR OWN RISK‼️
> ‼️TRIGGER WARNING‼️⚠️⚠️⚠️
>
> Hallooo. Because I’ve been away for a while, I made this chapter longer than planned. I hope you enjoy it all the way through to the end.(*ᵕ̈ᵕ̈)ꕥ
>
> Wahhhhh. I changed something in this chapter... I think it's suits Till more.
>
> Especially the music, reader-nim. You may finally play it in real time!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

|Room 089|

Till stood just outside it, the door slightly ajar, humming with soft light from the hallway. The air was heavy with the smell of antiseptic and something faintly metallic. His fingers hovered near the doorframe, trembling.

He didn’t remember how he got here.

Everything was noise.

And now, here he was.

The room inside was dim and blue-gray, shaped by the color of the clouds outside. Rain tapped against the tall window like nervous fingertips. A bedside monitor blinked quietly in the corner, its green light moving slowly. Breathing. Alive.

Inside the bed, someone was sitting up.

At first, Till couldn't see clearly. His eyes refused to adjust, or maybe his mind refused to believe it. It was a silhouette. A figure formed of bones and soft light, a small mountain of blankets pulled gently to the waist. The figure sat so still, so eerily motionless, that Till almost believed he'd imagined it.

The person didn't notice him.

The figure's head was turned, angled toward the window where the rain was dancing in streaks of silver. Their shoulders were slightly slumped forward. The blanket was folded carefully over his legs.

One arm, pale and thin, rested across their lap. The other was tethered to an IV line, the slow drip of saline barely audible in the silence.

Their back rose and fell, soft and slow.

Breathing.

Alive.

Awake.

Till's breath hitched. He swallowed down a sound that wasn't quite a gasp, not quite a sob. The space behind his eyes tightened, his chest constricted like something had wrapped around his ribs and begun to squeeze.

Could it really be…?

His shoes made no sound on the tile as he stepped inside. He didn't know how close he'd gotten until he realized he could hear the other person breathing.

That was when he saw him.

The figure—no, the man was impossibly thinner than Till remembered. The gown clung to the knobs of his shoulders. His neck looked too fragile to hold his head. His hair had grown out, messy and uneven, curled at the tips, and it fell over his eyes like a curtain no one had dared to brush aside. There were bruises under his cheekbones, pale yellows and blues like old watercolor stains.

He seemed... there and not there at once, as if his body remembered how to sit, how to breathe, but his soul hadn't quite caught up.

Till couldn't see his face yet. Only the side of his profile. Only the curve of a cheek and the ghost of a jawline he had memorized in another life. He could not see the eyes. Not yet. But he was certain. He knew.

He felt it in his spine. In his marrow. In his soul.

Till's legs nearly gave out. His heart rattled wildly in his chest, and the tips of his fingers went cold. Shock rooted him to the floor. Was this even real? Was this just a dream? A cruel, vivid hallucination born of too many sleepless nights and whispered wishes into the dark?

He opened his mouth to say something, *anything* but the words scattered like ash.

Then—

The figure stirred.

The shoulders moved first. Barely. As if remembering how to be a body again. Then the neck turned, hesitantly, like it hadn't done so in months. Slowly, so slowly, the boy began to shift in the bed.

The world stopped spinning.

Rain slowed outside the window like it, too, was holding its breath.

Till didn't blink.

Then the face turned fully into the light.

His cheeks were hollow. Lips cracked, dry. His skin was paper-pale, tinged faintly with gray. But the eyes—

The eyes were unmistakable.

Dark and round. Wide as the sea. Dark as the darkness nights. Heavy with something Till couldn't name, something fragile and full of weight. Doubt. Disorientation.

And when they locked onto Till's, there was no recognition. No flicker. No warmth.

Only wariness.

Fear.

As if Till were a stranger who'd wandered into the wrong room.

The man blinked slowly, like his mind was struggling to bridge the space between now and then. His mouth parted just slightly, as if remembering how to form words.

With a voice hoarse like torn parchment, quiet and raw, barely more than a breath, he rasped,

"...Hi."

Till's heart cracked.

The voice was worn, like a violin string pulled too tight, threatening to snap.

Then, his voice trembling ever so slightly, the man asked, "Who are you... perhaps, sir?"

The world fell out from under Till.

His thoughts scattered before they could make sense of what he'd just heard.

His mouth opened on instinct, trying to form a response, but nothing came. Only silence. Only air. Only the unsteady breath of someone who had just walked through a dream and couldn't tell whether he'd woken up or fallen deeper into it.

His chest constricted, sharp and painful, as though something had sunk its hooks beneath his ribs and yanked.

Sir?

What did he say?

Sir?

His mind echoed it again. Blank. Staggered. The syllable felt like a blade turned sideways inside his skull. It didn't fit. It didn't belong.

Not *Till.*

Not *You came.*

Not even a weak, sarcastic *What took you so long?*

Just… sir.

The rain lashed against the windows, sudden and hard, as though the sky itself recoiled. His vision blurred at the edges—not with tears, not yet, but with disbelief. A kind of heartbreak that didn't have a shape yet.

"Sir?" the man repeated, this time with confusion. Innocent. Like he didn't mean to break something precious.

Till's knees buckled, but he caught himself against the frame of the door.

His throat tightened until it ached. His fingers felt too far away. His legs wanted to move, to collapse, to run all at once.

He took a staggering step forward.

His voice cracked. "...Till."

It was barely audible.

A name. A lifeline. A plea.

Then, louder. Because maybe if he said it again, the world would stop spinning.

"Till."

There was so much weight behind those words that he nearly choked

on them.

Recognition didn't come. Only confusion. But the man nodded slowly, like he was trying to be polite.

"Nice to meet you, Sir Till. Sorry, it seems like you… know me? I don't remember anything, to be honest."

Silence swallowed the room whole.

Till's hands were shaking now.

"No, it's.. It's fine," he managed, choking on the lie.

He laughed softly, too brittle to be real. "As long as you're… you're okay."

The raven looked at him with furrowed brows, head tilted slightly. "Are we… you know, friends?"

Friends?

After all that?

But he nodded anyway. "Yes," he whispered. Then, louder. "Best friends."

"I see." Ivan—if that was Ivan—smiled faintly at the answer. It was

genuine, even if uncertain.

Till stared, searching his face, desperate for something to give him away. A flicker in his eyes, a twitch at the corner of his mouth, anything. But there was nothing. No recognition. No spark.

It was like looking at a painting of Ivan, too perfect and too wrong all at once.

The man noticed his discomfort and tilted his head. “Come here, Till-ssi?”

Till blinked. *-ssi?* The formality felt wrong. Like a blade twisting in his chest. But he obeyed. He took slow steps forward, like approaching a wild animal, afraid he might shatter this illusion just by moving.

When he reached the bed, he noticed a stray strand of hair hanging near Ivan’s eyes. Without thinking, he reached forward, fingers brushing upward gently. But the moment his hand came close, Ivan flinched—*violently*.

Till froze. Eyes wide.

“I—”

“Don’t misunderstand,” Ivan said quickly, voice calm but strained. “It’s a reflex, I guess? I’m not uncomfortable with you.”

Till could only nod. His fingers curled inward. “Okay…”

Till reached out again.

His hand moved through the silence like it was parting fog, slow, unsure, trembling at the edges. His fingertips hovered just above Ivan's knuckles, hesitating. The memory of that recoil still burned in his mind, vivid and immediate like a fresh bruise.

But this time…

This time, Ivan didn't flinch.

Till's fingers brushed against the back of his hand, and the skin there was warm and real. Not a dream. Not a ghost. His breath caught in his throat as he closed the gap and gently threaded their fingers together, holding on like something sacred had just been returned to him.

Ivan's hand was smaller than he remembered. Or maybe it had always been this way. Till just hadn't noticed until now, until everything else had been stripped away.

Their palms met, skin to skin, and it felt like something inside him cracked open.

Ivan blinked slowly at their joined hands, and then looked up. There was a flicker of something in his eyes, tentative, quiet.

"I mean it," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I don't know why I reacted like that."

His throat bobbed with a swallow. His brows furrowed slightly, confused at his own reaction, ashamed of it.

“In fact, I…” He glanced down at their hands again. The words caught in his throat. He forced them out slowly, like each syllable was something fragile being laid bare.

“I was really… relieved when I saw you.”

The silence that followed was thick, almost unbearable. It rang in Till’s ears louder than the words themselves.

Till blinked rapidly. He opened his mouth but had to swallow once, twice, to steady the trembling that rose in his chest.

“Can I…” His voice cracked. “Can I hug you? At least?”

Ivan looked like he’d been asked something impossibly heavy.

He didn’t speak. Just stared.

Like he was searching the question for hidden meanings. Like he was unsure if his body could take it. Or if Till’s could.

Till held his breath, waiting.

And then, slowly, Ivan nodded.

"…Yes."

The moment the word left his mouth, Till moved.

It wasn't a gentle hug.

It wasn't something you'd see in a movie, soft and beautiful.

It wasn't pretty.

It was desperate.

Till collapsed forward like his knees had given out, arms wrapping around Ivan's torso as if trying to fuse their bodies back together through sheer force of will.

His face pressed hard into the curve of Ivan's neck, where his scent used to be strongest, now dulled, faint, like a dying echo of a song he once knew by heart.

Till trembled uncontrollably.

His entire body shook like a dam had burst beneath his skin. His hands clutched at Ivan's back with white-knuckled ferocity. His shoulders heaved. He wasn't breathing right.

Each inhale was ragged. Sharp. Like his lungs were broken and had only now remembered how to function again, painfully.

It wasn’t enough.

Not even close.

No matter how tightly he held, it wasn’t enough. He wanted to disappear into Ivan’s warmth. To crawl beneath his skin, break open, and bleed out everything he’d been holding in for months. Every silent cry. Every prayer. Every second he thought he’d never get this moment again.

Till hugged him like a man starved.

He shook like he was falling apart, and in a way he was.

Ivan sat stiff, stunned.

His hands were frozen in the air, hovering awkwardly above Till’s back like he didn’t know what to do with them. As though he were afraid touching him wrong might shatter something even more.

He could feel Till’s breath against his neck, shallow and warm and wet.

And then, he heard it.

Sniffling.

Soft. Barely audible. But unmistakable.

Something trying to stay silent and failing.

Ivan's heart twisted.

Tentatively, cautiously, he lowered his arms. One wrapped around Till's trembling waist. The other slid to the back of Till's head, fingers threading into his hair.

The movement was shaky. Awkward. But it was all he could do.

He didn't know why this man cried like this in his arms.

Didn't know why his own chest ached in response.

But he wanted to.

He wanted to understand.

He wanted to remember.

Till's voice broke through the silence, muffled and bitter against Ivan's neck.

"…You utter jerk."

It was whispered with such forceful gentleness, like it had been waiting behind his teeth for far too long.

Ivan stiffened before slowly softening. The words weren't cruel or accusing. They ached with something painfully familiar.

And suddenly, something flickered in Ivan’s chest. Not a memory. Not yet.

But a feeling.

He held onto Till a little tighter.

And thought—

'I must have really hurt this person.'

A heavy silence hung between them, blanketing the moment like snowfall. The kind that dulls sound and turns the world soft and unreal.

Ivan swallowed.

His voice was low, uncertain.

“…Did I hurt you a lot?”

Till didn’t answer.

Not with words.

Just with the way he shook in his arms, the way he clung to him like he was the last thing keeping him from crumbling into dust.

And Ivan, gently, closed his eyes.

Maybe—

Maybe he wanted to remember.

Not just for Till.

But because if someone could cry like this for him—

Maybe he had once been someone worth remembering.

“Till-ssi,” Ivan murmured, voice slightly muffled against the press of their bodies. “You’re… crushing me.”

The words were soft, not exactly pained, but enough to draw Till back to himself.

Till blink rapidly, and it was like coming out of a daze, like waking up from a fever dream. His arms slowly loosened their desperate grip, his body reluctant to let go completely.

But he shifted back just a little, just enough to ease the pressure, though his hands still rested lightly on Ivan's shoulders, afraid that if he let go entirely, the man in front of him would vanish again.

"Sorry," Till muttered, voice rough, thin, cracking around the edges.

The space between them grew again, filled with something awkward. Till sniffled, turning his face away, quickly wiping at his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. His fingers trembled, and he kept his gaze low, embarrassed by how violently he'd come undone just now.

He didn't mean for it to be so much. But it was so much.

He felt it in his bones.

Ivan watched him in silence, studying the way Till rubbed at his face like a child caught crying in a place he wasn't supposed to. The way he tried to hide it. How small his shoulders looked now.

For some reason, Ivan wanted to say something. Tease him, maybe. *You know you're an ugly crier, right?* Something light. Something that felt natural.

Because it did.

For reasons he couldn't quite name, this kind of moment with Till felt familiar, like teasing him was second nature, like laughter belonged in the spaces between their breaths.

But maybe not now.

His gaze lingered.

Till noticed.

Still sniffing, still dabbing at his puffy eyes with a scowl, he lifted his head and glared.

“…What?” he asked, sharp and defensive, but his voice cracked mid-word.

Ivan couldn’t help it.

A sound escaped him, a low, airy thing. A laugh.

A small, tentative chuckle that felt like a ripple over still water.

It started in his throat and spread across his chest like warmth.

Till’s brows furrowed at first, confused, but then—something softened. His lips twitched, and slowly, he laughed too. A weak, snort-laugh that hurt his sore throat, but it came out anyway.

And for a brief moment, something cracked open between them—light seeping through.

Then Ivan, still smiling faintly, asked, “How long was I asleep?”

The question dropped softly between them.

Till’s smile faltered a little. He looked down, fingers tightening slightly where they still touched Ivan’s sleeve.

“…It’s been three months,” he said, voice gentler now. The words felt heavy, too big for the quiet room.

Ivan blinked. Three months. A whole season passed while he laid in stillness.

His lips parted.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Till looked up, confused. “For what?”

Ivan hesitated.

His eyes searched the space between them, as if trying to understand the ache in the air, the lingering sorrow in Till’s hands.

"I just felt like I should say that,” he said.

Till didn't answer. He just looked at him. At the boy who had become a man, sitting in a pale hospital bed with too-long hair and sun-starved skin, blinking at Till as though he were both a stranger and a ghost.

And in his silence, his fingers found Ivan’s hand, and gently curled around it.

The door creaked open gently, cutting through the tension that hung thick in the room like fog. A familiar voice followed.

“Ah, sorry to interrupt.”

It was Doctor Jacob. The man in a crisp white coat stepped inside with practiced ease. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, his ashy brown hair swept to the side, a clipboard in his hand, and a gentle expression resting behind his glasses.

"Good to see you awake, Ivan,” he said, voice warm and even.

Till turned quickly, straightening a little. Ivan just blinked, his head moving sluggishly toward the sound.

The man offered a professional but kind smile. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything too personal.”

Till gave a small shake of his head, stepping back from the bed slightly, brushing at his shirt. “No… not at all.”

Dr. Jacob's eyes shifted between them for a moment, as though reading the emotional weight in the air, then gave Till a small nod.

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to speak with you outside for just a moment."

Till glanced back at Ivan. Their fingers were still faintly touching.

Till gave his hand a small, steady squeeze, subtle but grounding, before finally letting go. Ivan blinked slowly, and for the briefest moment, something unreadable flickered across his expression.

As Till stood, he noticed Ivan's phone light up on the small tray beside the bed. A notification flashed across the lock screen before fading away.

A message.

He barely caught Ivan's expression: a flicker of discomfort, something disturbed. But it was gone as quickly as it came. His face turned slightly, staring back at the wall as if nothing had happened.

Till didn't say anything.

He followed Dr. Jacob out of the room and into the quiet corridor, away from the dim shadows and still tension of the room.

In the hallway, the door closed behind them with a soft click. The hum of fluorescent lights was steady overhead.

“I want to start by saying—congratulations,” he said, sincerely. “You’ve been with Ivan through this, haven’t you?”

Till nodded faintly.

The doctor offered a small smile.

“Well, it’s good news. He’s awake. That’s something we didn’t know would happen, frankly. You must’ve hoped a lot.”

Till just gave a tight-lipped nod again. “What happens now?”

Dr. Jacob’s tone grew a little more clinical. “His body’s been through a lot. Not just the coma—there was significant damage before he arrived at the hospital. Malnourishment. Substance toxicity. Seizure stress. And then three months of physical deterioration.”

The words felt cold, even though the doctor didn’t mean them to be. Like facts printed on a report. Like numbers.

“He can’t walk, currently,” Dr. Jacob added, almost gently.

That made Till’s breath catch.

“What?” he whispered.

“He’ll need rehabilitation. Physical therapy, strength training, monitored nutrition. It’s going to be a long road. For the time being, he’ll be in a wheelchair.”

Till blinked. He turned his face slightly away, eyes stinging again, not from tears this time, but from shame.

He hadn’t noticed.

He had hugged him. Clung to him. Wept on him. And he hadn’t noticed that Ivan’s legs hadn’t moved at all.

He hadn’t even looked.

He was too caught in the dream of having him back, alive, real. Too selfishly relieved to remember the reality of what Ivan had endured.

The doctor continued, gently, “He’ll be staying here for at least three weeks. Possibly longer. It depends on how quickly his body responds.”

Till swallowed hard and nodded slowly.

“And… about his memory?” Till asked, hesitant.

The doctor hesitated for the first time. His eyes turned more serious.

“There’s some memory trauma. The coma combined with the physical strain and mental distress—it’s not uncommon for patients to

experience amnesia. He might recover fragments, or he might not. It's difficult to say. And…"

Dr. Jacob exhaled, voice softening.

"He may develop some PTSD symptoms. Fear responses. Guilt. Disorientation. It won't always make sense to you—but it'll feel very real to him."

Till nodded again, though his body felt heavier now. His fingers tightened slightly around the sleeve of his hoodie.

"I understand."

Dr. Jacob watched him for a moment longer, then gently patted his shoulder.

"I also contacted your mother, Io. I thought she should be informed."

Till blinked at that. He'd almost forgotten anyone else existed in this world but Ivan.

"…Thank you," he said.

The doctor offered one last smile before turning back toward the room.

And behind the quiet corridor, behind the hospital doors, someone

who used to know him was lying in a bed just a few meters away, his body frail, his memory full of holes, and something heavy lurking behind his unreadable eyes.

Till suddenly wasn't sure if he'd truly gotten Ivan back at all.

The news exploded like a grenade thrown into the heart of the school.

Ivan's awake.

People whispered it in the halls like gospel. Then it wasn't just whispers, it became a roar. Social media lit up. Group chats buzzed. The dorms were flooded with the rumor, and not long after, the hospital lobby saw a line of visitors snaking through its sterile corridors.

Friends. Classmates. Teachers. Fans. Strangers. Even people who had never spoken to him before, all of them now desperate to get a glimpse, to confirm the miracle with their own eyes.

The "famous Alpha." The campus crush. The prodigy. The enigma. The man who disappeared.

They came with flowers, with cards, with balloons. They cried. They gasped. They clung to each other. Some even asked for photos, just to prove they'd seen him alive.

Mizi showed up in tears, practically sobbing into Ivan's blanket,

holding his hand until she was gently ushered aside. Sua and Luka stood beside each other, silent, nodding at Ivan. '*Congratulations.*'

Even the principal came, clearing his throat awkwardly and offering a congratulatory pat on the shoulder like Ivan had just won some academic competition. The man didn't know what else to do. No one really did.

Ivan… smiled.

But only just.

It was a flat, muted thing. Like someone had tugged the corner of his lips upward and forgotten to fill the rest in.

Till stood at the side, watching everything from behind Ivan’s bed.

He saw it.

He saw through it.

The way Ivan's eyes drifted slightly when someone called his name. The way he nodded politely to people he clearly didn’t recognize. The panic that flickered across his face every time the door opened, like a war-torn soldier flinching at every sound.

Overwhelmed.

Lost.

Overwhelming. For someone who just woke from a coma, who had been barely conscious a days ago, who could barely move without assistance, it was too damn much.

So Till spoke with Dr. Jacob. They decided to implement a stricter visitor schedule. Fewer people. Less time. Less pressure.

Ivan didn't argue.

But it didn't mean things got easier.

Till was there for all of it.

Day 5

Rehabilitation began. And with it came the real agony.

He saw how Ivan winced when the nurses lifted him from the bed. How his arms trembled from the strain. How the wheelchair felt like a cage. He watched Ivan start therapy, try to eat again. And fail.

Ivan vomited nearly everything he tried to eat. His body had forgotten how to hold. Till rubbed his back each time, holding a damp towel to his lips, saying nothing as Ivan cursed under his breath and wiped his mouth. Hands shaking, skin pale with effort and embarrassment.

He was there when the physical therapists massaged and stretched his legs, and Ivan bit down hard on a towel, hissing through the pain. Till

saw the sweat clinging to his brow, the tension in every muscle, the silent fury in his eyes. Fury at his body. At himself.

Each time he hissed in pain, Till flinched like he'd been struck.

He wanted to do something. Anything. But all he could do was be there, watching the person he cared for most suffer like this.

Ivan didn't make it easy.

"Don't touch me," he snapped once, jerking away from a nurse's hand.

He'd pushed away three people already that day, even swatting aside Mizi's offer to hold his water.

Till didn't speak.

He just waited.

Day 8

Till started performing less with the band. They didn't complain. They understood. His place was here.

His place was with him.

He wanted to be there for every step. Every inch of progress. Every win. Every moment Ivan needed someone to simply stay.

But there were days where it felt like Ivan had no progress at all.

Day 15

Ivan still couldn't walk.

One day, Ivan tried to stand. On his own. No nurses. No help. He was gripping the railing with stiff fingers, arms trembling, eyes narrowed.

His legs gave out, his knees buckling under his own weight, he had been standing for less than ten seconds. And slipped.

"Ivan—!" Till dropped everything in his hands and lunged forward, catching him just before his body hit the cold floor.

But Ivan didn't reach for him. He shoved against Till's chest instead, panting hard, eyes wide and unfocused.

"Let go of me!" Ivan barked, voice cracking into something deeper, darker. "Don't touch me!"

The air thickened.

Ivan's pheromones spilled into the room, wild, uncontrolled, and volatile. Even as a Beta, Till could feel them, as though he were standing in the middle of a storm with nowhere to hide. The weight of Ivan's distress clung to the air, seeped into his clothes, and filled the space between them like smoke trapped inside a sealed room.

"I said let go! I can do it myself," Ivan hissed, struggling against Till's grip. His elbow drove into Till's ribs. He shoved and clawed, not with any intent to hurt, but with the frantic desperation of someone drowning inside his own body.

Till still held him.

His arms locked around Ivan's torso, steady and unmoving. He didn't tighten his grip—but he didn't let go.

"Ivan, calm down," he whispered, his own breath caught in his throat.

Ivan's pupils were blown wide, and when he looked at Till, it was like he didn't know him. Like he was seeing a stranger. His lips pulled back into a grimace, a flash of teeth—rage, confusion, fear—all churning behind his eyes.

"You don't understand—" he snapped.

"I don't care." Till's voice was low but firm, unwavering. "I'm here."

Ivan thrashed harder now, heat radiating off of him in waves. The air grew heavy with pheromones—oppressive and choking, even if Till couldn't fully register them. Still, he felt it. The wrongness. The suffocation.

"Ivan—!"

Nurses burst in, alerted by the monitors and the spike in heart rate. One of them rushed forward with a syringe.

“He’s having a panic response—get him steady!”

“I said don’t touch me!” Ivan shouted at them too, voice raw, desperate.

“Don’t mind me,” Till said quickly, his voice breaking slightly as he tightened his arms just enough to stop Ivan from falling again. “Help him.”

“But, your arm—”

“Help him!” Till barked.

A nurse grabbed Ivan’s wrist, another pressed the injection into his arm. Ivan fought until the very end—until his muscles gave out, his eyes fluttered closed, and his body sagged heavy into Till’s arms like a marionette with its strings cut.

Only when the monitors steadied did the silence return.

Only then did anyone breathe.

Till’s sleeves had been pup in the struggle. Red marks clawed across his forearms—half-moon bruises from Ivan’s nails. One of the nurses gently reached toward him.

“You’re hurt. Are you—”

“Don’t mind me,” Till said, still kneeling on the floor, still holding Ivan even in his unconsciousness. His voice was quieter now. Empty. “Just help him. Please.”

The nurse hesitated, then slowly nodded.

And Till just sat there, letting the weight of Ivan's body rest against him—feeling every tremor still trapped beneath skin, and wondering how much deeper the pain ran beneath it all.

There were days that felt like spring after a long winter.

Days when the silence in Ivan’s room wasn’t heavy. When the machines hummed quietly in the background, and the sun spilled in from the window with just enough warmth to soften the edges of everything.

Ivan was eating now.

He took his medications without protest. He greeted the nurses. Sometimes, he even laughed a little when the TV played something stupid. His voice no longer cracked when he spoke—it had strength now, even if it was quiet.

Till cherished those moments.

He played songs beside Ivan's bed, they called it a "mini-concert." Just the two of them. Sometimes three, when a nurse lingered at the door to listen.

With Till's acoustic guitar and cracked jokes in between. He sang old classics, some of Ivan's favorites, some of his own. Ivan didn't always react, but when he did, when he actually looked at Till and smiled, even just faintly, it felt like the sky opened up.

Till would have given everything just to see that smile again.

He didn't care if Ivan never remembered.

He'd build new memories.

Bright ones. Warm ones. Ones where Ivan didn't need to bleed just to be understood.

But even on the good days, there were shadows.

Sometimes, Ivan would go quiet mid-conversation, eyes drifting off toward the window like he was watching something invisible.

His gaze would dull. Hollow. Like he wasn't really there.

And in those moments, Till would quietly set his guitar down, move to

Ivan's side, and hum softly. Sometimes he'd hold Ivan's hand. Sometimes he'd sit quietly and let the silence pass like a storm.

Come back, he'd think.

Come back to me.

He never said it out loud.

Day 23

Ivan was sitting up in bed, his blanket tugged around his legs, flipping slowly through channels on the hospital TV. Till was tuning his guitar on the couch.

Then came a voice, low and rough, breaking through the soft air.

"…Till-ssi."

Till blinked. He turned so fast his pick fell to the floor. "Yeah?" he said, almost too quickly, brows lifting.

Ivan's eyes didn't quite meet his, but his voice was steady. "Can I have gukbap?"

Till stared at him.

Gukbap.

His favorite.

It was the first time Ivan had asked for something—not medication, not water, not silence—just something so casually, so normally.

Till's eyes lit up like someone had turned on the sun inside him. The way he lit up made the nurse passing by smile.

"Sure! I'll take an order online—just give me a second!" Till scrambled for his phone, "You haven't asked for anything this whole time."

Ivan looked down at his hands and muttered, "I just remembered I liked it."

That was all he said.

Till fumbled for his phone with a ridiculous kind of urgency, like this was the most important mission in the world.

Maybe it was.

Because Ivan had spoken. Ivan had wanted something.

And Till would give him *everything.*

Ivan's phone buzzed. Just a soft chime, barely noticeable.

Till would glance toward it instinctively, then to Ivan. "What is it?"

And Ivan, always so calm on the surface, would answer with a small shrug, "It's just spam. Don't mind it."

So Till wouldn't. He'd nod and return to whatever they were doing, feeding him soup, humming softly, or scribbling lyrics on his notepad. But something about Ivan's tone… it always felt like a wall. Not made of brick, but of quiet refusal.

Still, Till didn't push.

Ivan was doing better. That's what mattered.

His hair now trimmed and groomed, it wasn't skin-close anymore. There was life in his cheeks again, a softness in his skin, color returning. He didn't look like someone teetering on the edge of life anymore.

And he could walk.

Not perfectly. Not quickly. But there were steps. Wobbly, brave, stubborn steps that Ivan made on his own, without the help of nurses or rails. When Till first saw it, his throat locked. His chest tightened.

It almost made him cry.

But then his mother, Io, *did cry*. Loudly. Her sobs filled the hallway, the room, the air itself. And Till, instead of allowing himself to crumble, turned to comfort her, arms around her shaking shoulders, soothing her as his own tears clung to the corners of his eyes, unshed.

It was a great day.

Ivan was trying. So hard. Till could see it in the way sweat clung to his brow during therapy, the way he pushed himself, cursed under his breath, clenched his jaw but never stopped.

And in the glint of Ivan's deep, jet-black eyes. Till saw fire. Not rage. *Will.*

The kind of fire that says: *I want to be here.*

Till held onto that.

He sang for Ivan each night.

Worked on his song when Ivan slept. Scribbled down lines as his heart swelled with things too big to say out loud.

'Even if your cold words.'

He'd hum those words under his breath, fingers dancing over the

guitar strings, weaving a melody from everything they'd survived.

Day 29

The doctor gave them permission to go outside. Just a short trip, wheelchair assisted, supervised, but still, outside.

Till wheeled Ivan out with quiet joy in his steps.

The air smelled like salt.

Ivan had requested the sea. And so they found it—quiet, endless, blue and silver under a pale sky. The sun was low, beginning its descent. There were no crowds. Just waves and wind.

"Is this okay?"

Till asked as he pushed the wheelchair closer to the shore, where the wind played with his hair and the scent of the ocean wrapped around them like an old memory.

Ivan nodded, his eyes scanning the horizon. "It's more than okay."

Till set the brake and sat beside him on the sand, hugging his knees close. The guitar case rested nearby, untouched.

They didn't speak for a while.

Waves rolled in and out.

Seagulls called faintly in the distance.

'Carve scars beneath my eyes…'

Till looked sideways, brushing hair from his face, and watched the wind tug at Ivan's shirt. His skin looked softer in the sea-light. His eyes distant—but less lost than before.

"You know…" Ivan started, eyes on the horizon, "I know you're writing a song."

Till paused, glancing at him.

"I've seen you scribbling. Heard you humming it. For a while now."

A slow grin tugged at Till's lips. "Yeah, I guess I have."

Ivan turned his gaze from the ocean to him, something clear and unwavering in his dark eyes. "Sing it for me."

Till hesitated, fingers brushing the strings, then he nodded. "Okay."

He started playing. A soft strum, notes threading gently through the air like seafoam. Then his voice followed—quiet, roughened from the wind and weight of days.

“Even if your cold words

Carve scars beneath my eyes…”

He paused there—just slightly—when he noticed Ivan looking at him differently.

Then Ivan did something unexpected.

He sang.

His voice was raspy, low, and cool. Not polished, not trained—but real. Raw. And it slipped right into the empty spaces of the song like it had always belonged.

“You can break me apart…

Notice my pain…

And mend me right now…

To quiet my fears…”

Till blinked, stunned.

“I didn’t know you could sing.”

Ivan shrugged, a half-smirk playing on his lips. “You didn’t ask.”

Till scoffed. “Fuck you.”

Ivan laughed—short and warm. It filled the space between them like sunlight.

“Can you add that?” Ivan asked, glancing at him, his voice softer now.

Till didn’t answer right away. But the answer was already written in his mind, The lyrics had taken root the second Ivan sang them. Tattooed in the air between them, locking them in place.

“I will,” he said, nodding.

They took a break from the song, the sea’s lullaby filling the quiet spaces between them.

Till found himself watching Ivan.

His profile caught in the golden light, hair tousled by the breeze, eyes fixed on the horizon like he was chasing something far away. The way the sun kissed the sharp line of his jaw, the way the wind tousled the strands of his dark hair—it made something ache in Till’s chest.

He looks… *perfect*.

Till’s fingers twitched against his thigh. A familiar itch bloomed in his bones, the desire to sketch. To capture this. Not just the image, but the moment. The soul of it.

He was still lost in that thought when movement caught his eye.

Ivan was walking—no, *limping*—toward the shoreline. On his own. No help. No cane. Just sheer willpower.

“Ivan—!” Till jolted upright, panic snapping his voice sharp. “Hey! Careful! You should’ve asked for help!”

Ivan turned around with that damn snaggletooth smile of his, his feet in the wet sand. “It’s fine, look! I can do it.”

The waves lapped gently at his ankles, and he stood there, triumphant.

“Come here, Till!”

That name. Spoken so easily. So familiarly.

Not ‘Till-ssi’, not ‘you’, not some distant murmur like in the first few days of recovery.

Just—*Till.*

It's just his name—hell, of course he'll call him that. But that small, thoughtless change left something thunderous in Till’s chest.

“Till, come on!” Ivan called again, grinning—breathless and radiant like the boy Till remembered. That snaggletooth flashing, that voice cracking slightly from the sea wind.

Till muttered under his breath, hoisting up his jeans. “We only told Dr. Jacob we’d get fresh air…”

“Hush,” Ivan interrupted, splashing a bit. “We’ll deal with that later.”

And just like that, the tension dissolved. Ivan splashed the water with one foot, then the other, laughing deep from his chest. The sea answered with shimmering ripples, curling around their ankles. He kicked a small wave toward Till—on purpose.

“You ass—!”

But before Till could finish, he was hit with another splash. He gasped, blinking salty water off his face. “Gahh!"

Ivan was laughing, breathy and full of mischief, his voice richer than it had been in days. He leaned back, arms outstretched like a kid, letting the sea rush past him. He was soaked from the knees down, but he didn’t care. His joy was infectious.

Till was supposed to be annoyed.

He was annoyed. *Kind of.*

But the feeling dissolved the moment he drew closer and caught the

pure joy shining in Ivan's eyes.

God, he thought, *you're beautiful like this.*

"Till, look!" Ivan crouched slightly and pointed at a small sea urchin clinging to a rock beneath the waves. Dark green and spiny, it wobbled gently with the tide.

"It's you!" he declared with mischief.

Till squinted at it, offended. "What the hell? Why would that be me?"

Ivan wheezed with laughter, nearly losing his balance. "Look at its grumpy face!"

"It doesn't have a face! And watch your step!"

"It does if you squint hard enough."

"You're ridiculous," Till muttered, but his voice held no bite. Only affection.

Ivan was still laughing. The sound echoed against the waves like sunlight bouncing off glass.

And Till stared again.

Just for a second.

His heart thudded like it wanted to speak.

Then, without thinking, he stepped forward. Just a little. Just close enough to see the sun in Ivan's eyes, the crinkle in his smile.

He leaned up on his toes—close. So close.

Almost.

His lips hovered near Ivan's cheek.

But then—
Ivan turned, eyes wide, blinking at him, confused.
"…What are you doing?"

Till immediately regretted everything.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"I—uh—there was a rock," he blurted, taking a step back, heart racing. "I slipped."

Ivan's brows lifted, and he looked at the ground around them—flat, smooth sand, no rocks in sight. But he didn't say anything right away.

“You sure?" Ivan said finally, voice a little lower, unreadable.

“Forget it,” Till muttered, already red from the neck up..

Idiot.

What the hell was he thinking?

'I don't even like Ivan like that.'

The panic only worsened when he turned away, trying to escape the awkwardness. But before he could even take two steps, a hand gripped his arm gently but firmly.

“Where are you going?” Ivan asked.

Till didn’t answer. His throat had closed up, and his heart was thudding way too loud in his ears.

“Till,” Ivan called again, softer this time.

But just as Till turned to look back at him, Ivan’s knees wobbled.

“Whoa—!”

Ivan toppled backwards, losing his balance as his legs gave way, and Till, caught off guard, instinctively reached out to stop him. Instead of steadying either of them, the motion only pulled Till down along with

him.

Thud!

“ACK!”

Cold seawater splashed upward as both of them fell flat into the shallows, soaking them from the waist down. A loud splash echoed through the empty beach.

Till gasped, sitting up fast. “We’re soaking wet!” he shouted, now entirely drenched and breathless, his hair sticking to his cheeks.

Ivan lay on his back, his face scrunching in pain.

“What now?” Till said, ready to grumble—until he saw the grimace on Ivan’s face.

Then he realized where he was sitting.

Right over Ivan’s crotch.

“Oh my god,” Till squeaked, scrambling off him like he’d been electrocuted. “That must’ve—oh crap, that must’ve hurt—”

Ivan winced, face slightly pale. “I think I saw heaven for a second,” he rasped.

Till groaned and stood up, brushing wet sand off his legs. “Don’t be dramatic.”

“I’m not,” Ivan wheezed, eyes still closed. “It really hurts.”

“Can you get up?” Till crouched beside him, offering a hand.

Ivan opened one eye and squinted at him. “In a minute. Let me mourn my dignity.”

They eventually made it back to the hospital, wet clothes squelching with every step. Ivan sat slumped in the wheelchair, visibly in pain but trying to keep a straight face. Till pushed him with a deeply embarrassed expression, eyes downcast, his own clothes soaked through and clinging uncomfortably to his body.

All eyes turned toward them the moment they entered the hallway.

One of the nurses blinked in surprise, then hurried over. “What happened to Sir Ivan?!”

Till looked up, face burning.

He opened his mouth, tried to speak—then closed it again.

There was no way he was explaining that in front of everyone.

“…We went to the sea,” he mumbled.

The nurse blinked again. “And?”

“…He fell.”

Ivan groaned dramatically from the chair. “Multiple times.”

“Don’t make it worse,” Till hissed under his breath.

Ivan—despite the pain, whispered back, “If you were trying to give me a heart attack, Sea Urchin, mission accomplished.”

Till nearly wheeled him straight into the wall.

Day 57- December

The wind bit gently at their cheeks, the scent of winter lingering in the air—cold, sharp, and clean. The world was dressed in pale light, the sun tucked behind a veil of gray clouds, but to Till, it felt nothing like winter.

It felt like spring.

Ivan stood tall just a few feet away, framed by the barren trees and the soft drift of frost-kissed air. His hair was tousled by the wind, cheeks lightly flushed from the cold, a faint breath visible every time

he exhaled. He wore a long coat that hugged his frame, black gloves covering hands that had once trembled. There was a subtle elegance in the way he stood, a quiet strength in how he held the crane in one hand—not like an aid, but like a blade. A warrior's sword. He didn't shrink from it. He owned it.

It was hard not to stare.

Till's heart tugged, a strange tightness settling in his chest as he watched Ivan take another steady step forward. The movement was slow, careful, but firm. Confident. The kind of step Ivan would have always taken before. And now—again.

Pride swelled in Till's chest like an overfilled balloon. The man who once lay in bed with hollow eyes and skin pale as sheets was walking. Breathing. Living. There was still a haze of fog behind his eyes, amnesia still hung like a veil between them, but every moment was real. Every smile was real.

Ivan approached him with the soft crunch of gravel underfoot. Till blinked, a breath caught on the tip of his tongue.

"Hm?" he asked, barely above a whisper.

Ivan reached out with his gloved hands, adjusting the scarf around Till's neck. Careful. Gentle. A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips, so faint, but so bright to Till's eyes.

He didn't say anything else.

Just— "*Let's go?*"

Till gave a small nod, almost dazed.

They walked together slowly, side by side. Till stole glances—just small ones, as if afraid to break the moment. Ivan looked ahead, posture proud, his hand gripping the cane with grace, not shame. And for once, Till didn't feel the sting of longing or the ache of something missing.

He felt... whole.

He had fought tooth and nail for this. For Ivan to walk again, to eat again, to breathe with purpose. For Ivan to look at him and smile, even if the memories were gone. For every tear he hid, for every sleepless night, for every word left unsaid, it was worth it.

This wasn't a perfect story. The road had been cruel. Harsh. There were moments Till thought of giving up, when Ivan stared through him like glass, when his body was weak and spirit fractured. There were days of guilt, of doubt, of loneliness that cut deeper than any knife.

But this, this walk beside him felt like a new beginning.

They didn't need to speak. The silence between them was warm, safe. And for the first time in a long time, Till didn't look over his shoulder for the next bad thing to come. He looked forward.

He was still the feisty cat, quick to hiss and lash his tail, but his eyes were soft when they fell on Ivan. Because no matter how cold the world felt, no matter how empty the winter air, Ivan was there.

And Ivan, for all his teasing smirks and quiet jabs, never let go of the scarf.

Till's house was filled with warmth that winter, twinkling lights draped lazily around doorways, the scent of cinnamon and roasted chestnuts curling through the air, and the soft sound of holiday music buzzing through slightly worn-out speakers.

The Christmas tree stood proudly in the corner, leaning just a little to the right, but decorated with care.

It was Christmas Eve when Ivan arrived, scarf wrapped neatly around his neck, a small paper bag of gifts in his hand.

He walked in with hesitant steps, but with Till opening the door for him and guiding him inside with a muttered "hurry up, it's cold," the air seemed to ease around him.

Mizi was already there, bouncing slightly on the couch in her oversized Christmas sweater with glittering stars. Her smile was as bright as the lights around the tree. Sua sat beside her, sipping cocoa with a deadpan stare but a gentle hand on Mizi's thigh.

Io lit up when she saw Ivan. She welcomed him with open arms, just like she always did, patting his hair as if he hadn't been missing from the world for months.

They exchanged small gifts and played cheesy holiday games. Mizi got

glitter on everything. Sua let herself smile, especially when Mizi made Till wear a fluffy reindeer headband. Ivan didn't say much, but when he laughed, really laughed, the sound filled the room with something warm. And Till… Till didn’t stop watching him.

On New Year’s Eve, they all gathered again. Fireworks popped in the distance, and they stood bundled up on the rooftop of Till’s apartment, sharing strawberry soda and slices of burnt chocolate cake. That was the night Till finally told them.

“Wait—what?” Sua blinked, the wind ruffling her cropped hair.

“He doesn’t remember everything.. He still has amnesia,” Till said softly, glancing toward Ivan, who stood leaning against the metal railing, the city lights glowing in his eyes.

Mizi gasped, her mouth opening like a goldfish. “All this time?! You seemed so—so… you?”

Ivan shrugged, lips quirking. “Apparently, I'm charming either way."

Sua tilted her head, “Are you sure you aren’t pretending? I wouldn’t put it past you.”

Ivan chuckled under his breath, voice low and flat. “No way.”

“Makes sense why you were a complete jerk in the hospital," Sua added, sipping her drink again.

Mizi hugged him without warning. “It’s okay! I like this version of you, too. All cool and mysterious. Like a tortured vampire prince.”

The new semester came like a breath of frost. Ivan returned to university, and with him, returned the whispers.

Gone was the smiling charm that used to make people swoon. No more casual greetings. Ivan was distant. Eyes that didn’t linger. A presence that made people hold their breath. An Alpha who didn’t need to speak to dominate the room.

Despite missing almost a whole semester, Ivan still aced his classes. Word spread that he was back with a vengeance—brilliant, untouchable.

Some said it was because of his prestigious parents. Some guessed private tutors. But what most didn’t know—he hadn’t contacted his parents even once. And they hadn’t visited him, not even during the hospital stay.

They did, however, continue depositing money in his account. Ivan never touched it.

The moment Till stepped into the rehearsal room, he was tackled with the force of three hurricanes. Hyuna launched first, almost crushing his ribs with the intensity of her affection. Dewey followed, arms wide like a bear, squeezing the air out of him.

While Isaac chanted, “OUR EMO IS BACK! ,” like it was a cult ritual.

Luka, standing a few steps away, captured every dramatic second on his phone with a gleeful smile.

“Smile for the trauma album,” Luka chimed, snapping a photo just as Hyuna kissed Till’s cheek with a *mwah* sound loud enough to echo.

“I never knew you were this famous,” Ivan mused from the corner, his eyes scanning the small crowd around Till. It wasn’t jealousy—more like genuine surprise.

“I forgot I am,” Till said, breathless as he pushed Hyuna off. “Overwhelming, not gonna lie.”

He slid his guitar case down, dusted off the amp, and plugged in like he never left. It was instinctive. Muscle memory. A part of him had missed this, the chaos, the soundcheck screeches, the emotional tantrums, the midnight coffee-fueled rehearsals.

Amid the laughter and tuning, Till found a quiet pocket of space with his notebook open and the half-finished song laid bare on the page. The melody was haunting. Ivan's lyrics were simple, but they carried so much of him. They clung to the page like a ghost between the lines.

It wasn’t finished yet. But it would be.

Till tapped his pen lightly against the paper, biting his lower lip. He didn't have much to give Ivan. Not really. But maybe this song, this stage, could be his gift.

He'd ask Ivan to sing it with him. Just once. Just them.

He smiled softly at the thought.

And continued writing.

[3 :37 AM]

Till stirred faintly in his sleep, lashes fluttering against his cheeks. The room was dark, but the faint blue glow of the snowy night filtering through the curtains made the shadows deeper. There was a presence in the room.

Too heavy to ignore.

To solid for a dream.

Eyes still fogged by sleep, Till turned slightly—and hitched.

A towering figure loomed at the foot of his bed, its outline broad and unmoving. For a split second, his heart stuttered. The shape, huge and rigid, cloaked in darkness, felt wrong. A glint of red caught the moo

nlight, sending a chill through Till's veins. A demo—...!

"Fuck!"

He jolted upright, blankets tangling around his legs, instinctively bracing for something or anything. Then, the figure moved, the familiar slope of his shoulders now registering.

Shitty Ivan.

His breath still erratic, Till hissed, “When the hell did you get here? Did mom let you in?”

“I have a spare key.” Ivan said, as a matter of fact.

Right. Till blinked, still catching up. “I forgot.”

He collapsed back onto the bed, rubbing his face with both hands. “You scared the hell out of me.”

But when he looked again, something felt off. Ivan’s eyes looked hollow, sunken into their sockets, as though he hadn’t slept, or had been lost somewhere far more cruel than sleep could ever offer.

Till didn’t ask. Not yet.

Instead, he shifted to one side of the bed, wordlessly patting the empty space beside him, his voice drowsy and soft. “Sleep.”

Ivan didn’t speak again. He only obeyed, like a soldier taking quiet orders, laying down beside him. Within seconds, Till’s breathing evened out again, slipping back into exhausted unconsciousness. A small, quiet snore puffed from his lips, barely audible over the faint sound of the wind scratching the windowpane outside.

Yet Ivan didn’t sleep.

Instead. His gaze traced the curve of Till’s jaw, the flutter of his pulse, the rise and fall of his chest. The soft glow of the snow made Till look so delicate—fragile in a way Ivan could never say aloud. For a long time, he didn’t move. Then, slowly, as if possessed by something, Ivan sat up.

His hand moved on its own.

It hovered just above Till's throat.

Fingers curled, slightly trembling.

There was no malice. No hatred. The gesture looked violent, but there was something broken in it, something almost mournful. As though his hand couldn't decide whether it wanted to harm or to shield. His eyes shook, not with rage, but grief. A longing so tightly coiled it bordered on dangerous.

Till murmured something nonsensical in his sleep. A soft, silly sound. It cracked the spell.

Ivan's fingers retracted, quietly retreating like the tide pulling away from a stone.

February 12

The air was thick with excitement. The event hall buzzed with energy, flooded by lights, music, and the restless chatter of students. *ALNST's* name was everywhere—on banners, headbands, glowing sticks. The whole campus seemed to come alive just to witness their return.

Backstage, Till stared into the mirror, chest rising and falling fast. His eyeliner was sharp, his hair tousled just right, and his nails, repolished to that deep, glossy black he always wore when he wanted to feel like someone who could take on the world. Tonight, he looked every bit the rock-pop star he used to be. But he didn't feel it.

Not when he knew Ivan was out there, waiting.

It would be the first time Ivan ever saw him perform.

He clutched the mic tighter.

When it was finally time, the lights dimmed and the crowd screamed. Hyuna gave him a quick thumbs-up from behind the drums. Isaac and Dewey were in position. Luka was filming everything already. Till stepped up to the mic, heart pounding like war drums in his chest.

The intro of "***Little Bit of Love***" by Tom Grennan played.

He closed his eyes and began, voice soft but raw.

"I've been holding onto pieces,

Swimming in the deep end…"

The crowd quieted, letting his voice fill the room.

"Tryna find my way back to you

'Cause I'm needing a little bit of love…"

Each word bled with feeling. The ache, the weight, the longing, it was there. Through each note. Through every breath.

He opened his eyes.

And searched.

Scanning through the faces, the silhouettes blurred by the lights and distance. Searching. Searching.

And then—there.

Ivan.

Standing near the front, flanked by Mizi and Sua. His expression open, eyes fixed on Till, not blinking. He wasn't smiling yet, but something in his gaze stirred Till's lungs into breathing again. It was focused. Anchored. He looked… amazed.

'I've got voices in my head and there's a deafening silence

I've got voices in my head and I can't lie..'

Mizi waved a light stick and shook their hands around wildly, wearing an obnoxiously adorable ALNST headband with a chibi Till face on top. Sua, deadpan but clearly enjoying it, filmed with her phone while bobbing her head. Mizi poked Ivan in the side, urging him to cheer louder, making him laugh.

Till saw it then.

Ivan smiled.

A real, wide, honest smile that reached his eyes. So bright it made Till feel like he was going to combust on stage.

He grinned before he could stop himself. His lips tugged upward, breathless but glowing.

“*Just like the air I'm breathing*

These awful wounds ain't healing…”

His voice cracked slightly. But it didn’t matter. He was too full, too alive.

“Lately I've been wakin' up

In that dream you stay

Calling your name

Stayed up too late just thinking of… you…”

Till remembered days. Broken days. Lonely nights. Nights he spent watching Ivan sleep. The days at the hospital. The strange comfort of having him near. The ache in silence. The fear. The cold of losing someone even when they were still there.

But right now—he was here.

He gave it his all. Until the final chorus.

Mizi wiggled Ivan’s hand like a child, swaying to the beat, mouthing the lyrics dramatically. Sua rolled her eyes affectionately and gave

Ivan's arm a gentle nudge.

Till didn't want to look again.

But he did.

"'Cause I'm needing a little bit of love

A little bit of love, a little bit of love

A little bit of love...."

At the last part of the song, as the lights dimmed low and his voice hung in the air like fog. And then he looked again. Ivan's grin was so wide, it reached his eyes. His shoulders were loose, laugh lines soft around his eyes. Like he was... happy. So *damn* happy.

And he was proud.

It was too much.

Like Till was his whole world for that moment.

It nearly knocked the wind out of him.

Till looked away, suddenly breathless, sweat dripping from his temple. Heart thundering. A grin still on his lips that he couldn't erase.

Damn you, he thought.

He shouldn't have looked.

Too dangerous.

Too much

The song ended.

The crowd exploded in cheers and applause. Screams echoed through the room like waves. Till stood there, gasping, flushed, glowing, bathed in light and sound, he closed his eyes and remembered only the smile on Ivan's face.

He bowed, breathless. Still smiling.

After the concert, Till didn't linger.

He slipped out the backdoor with his bag slung over one shoulder, hoodie thrown over his glitter-dusted shirt. No one stopped him, not the band, not Luka, not even Hyuna. They all knew where he was going.

The night air was cold, brushing over his sweat-slick skin as he made his way to that familiar building, the one with the rooftop where the stars always felt closer, where the moon hung full and glowing like it was watching them.

Ivan was already there, leaning against the railing, tall and still, like he'd been waiting for hours. The moonlight painted him in silver, the soft breeze moving his dark hair just enough to make him look too good for reality.

Till stopped at the entrance, catching his breath, raising a single finger in front of him like a warning.

“Let me catch my breath,” he huffed.

Ivan’s lips curved into a smile. “How lucky am I? The star of the night is here with me.”

Till rolled his eyes and walked closer, lips tugging in a half-smile despite himself. “Why’d you call?” he managed to say, his voice still raspy from the performance.

“Why did you arrive?” Ivan asked, quiet and calm.

Till narrowed his eyes. “Well, the hell? Should I ignore you then?”

Ivan chuckled softly. “I’d be sad.” He looked at Till like it was the most honest thing he could say. “I just wanted to see you after your concert. That’s all.”

“I’m here, then,” Till replied, casually, though something tight pulled in his chest.

“You were so good, Till. You don’t have to worry about me,” Ivan said, eyes glimmering like the stars above them.

“What are you talking about?” Till asked, brow quirking.

“I mean everything I said.”

Till squinted at him, a little suspicious. “You’re acting weird again…”

“Am I?”

Silence settled between them for a beat. It wasn't uncomfortable, just... careful. As though neither of them wanted to move too quickly and shatter the moment.

Then Ivan slowly lifted his arm, silently inviting Till closer.

Till narrowed his eyes, still trying to decide if Ivan was teasing him. After a moment, he stepped forward, closing the distance between them and into the warmth Ivan offered.

Their arms found each other.

The sudden closeness should have felt awkward.

But it didn't.

It felt like coming home.

Ivan's arms slipped around Till completely, holding him close as his chin briefly brushed the top of Till's head. He held on as though he

never wanted to let go.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “For everything you’ve done for me.”

Till grumbled into his chest, feisty even when melting. “It’s nothing. You don’t have to thank me like this.”

Ivan huffed a quiet laugh, but didn’t let go. Instead, he cradled Till closer, as if memorizing the shape of him.

“…Ivan?”

“Yeah?”

Till didn’t pull away. “What do you want on Valentine’s?”

They were still tangled in each other, the breeze rustling faintly around them. Ivan blinked, trying to think, but the smile he gave was small.

“I don’t know.”

“Oh really?” Till muttered, nudging him with his forehead. “But you better be there.”

Ivan didn’t reply.

He just smiled again, then rested his head on Till's shoulder.

Someone's phone rang, low and persistent, cutting gently through the quiet of the rooftop.

Till flinched slightly, blinking like he'd forgotten the world beyond Ivan even existed. He shifted, reluctant, and reached into his pocket. His screen lit up.

[CALL INCOMING: ThE bLoNd]

He sighed, the moment slipping just a bit from his hands.

"I have to take this," he muttered, glancing up at Ivan with a sheepish look.

Ivan gave a slow nod, loosening his arms just enough for Till to step back.

Turning slightly away, Till answered the call. "Yeah? …Now? Seriously?" He exhaled through his nose, rubbing his brow.

"I thought we were done for the night… Okay, fine. I'll be there. Just give me ten minutes."

He ended the call and lingered there for a moment, fingers still wrapped around his phone, before turning back to Ivan.

“I need to go,” he said, eyes flicking back up to Ivan.

But before he could take a step back, Ivan reached for him. And just like that, Till was in his arms again.

Ivan’s arms wrapped around him fully this time, his hand sliding up between Till’s shoulder blades, the other curling softly at the small of his back. It wasn’t rushed. It wasn’t hesitant. He just held him like he belonged there, like Till was something he wanted to keep warm.

And for a moment, Till melted into it.

His face rested lightly against Ivan’s chest, his hands brushing the fabric of his coat, catching the faint thrum of a heartbeat beneath.

Then—quietly, gently—Ivan dipped his head.

He kissed Till’s temple.

It was slow, featherlight, but not casual. His lips lingered there, still and warm, like he was pouring something into that single point of contact. A silent message. Something words didn’t know how to carry.

The kiss didn’t ask for anything.

It simply stayed.

Till’s breath caught. He didn’t move, didn’t speak. He stood there,

held in that space, in the quiet rhythm of Ivan's heart, in the hush of the rooftop breeze. It wasn't overwhelming. It wasn't dramatic. It was just… soft. A stillness made of skin and air and closeness.

When Ivan finally pulled back, his smile was quiet. Familiar. The kind of smile that once meant safety. And for a second, it was easy to pretend everything was still the same.

"…Did you remember something?" Till asked, voice barely above a whisper.

Ivan's eyes flickered upward, toward the stars, the moon, something far away. "Maybe," he said with a small shrug.

He brushed a strand of hair behind Till's ear, as if he didn't want to forget the shape of his face.

The corner of his mouth lifting. "Now go."

Till hesitated, just for a breath. Then he nodded, still feeling the warmth of Ivan's arms, the faint brush of lips against his skin.

"You better be ready this Valentine's!," he called out, voice half-laugh, half-threat, already backing away toward the stairwell.

Ivan didn't answer right away.

He just raised a hand, waving. That soft, small smile still lingering on his lips. The moonlight wrapped around him like a second skin.

“…Farewell,” Ivan said, under his breath.

But Till heard him.

He turned, already jogging backward, waving wildly. “Bye!"

He smiled.

Ivan watched him disappear into the night, his silhouette shrinking until he was gone.

The stars glittered overhead.

He stayed there, quietly, under the full moon, like a wish waiting to be made.

February 13th — 11:15 PM

Till couldn't sleep.

He laid in bed, shifting side to side, eyes open against the dark, as if the night itself weighed heavily on his chest. His body was tired, but his mind was too loud. Tomorrow was supposed to be a big day. Valentine’s Day and Ivan’s birthday.

His song wasn't finished, but almost. His surprise wasn't ready, but close. And yet… something didn't feel right.

He stared at the ceiling for another ten minutes before throwing off the blanket. Fine. If he couldn't force sleep, he'd exhaust his body instead.

He pulled on a hoodie, slipped on his headphones, and quietly opened the door of his room. He peeked toward his mother's room who's still asleep. *Good.*

Tiptoeing like a thief, he made his way out, locking the front door behind him with a gentle click.

Outside, the night air was crisp and heavy. Despite the hour, there were still a few people out, students prepping for campus Valentine's activities, vendors organizing stalls, couples walking hand in hand under the dim yellow glow of the streetlamps.

Till slipped his hands into his hoodie pockets and walked with no real destination. Just somewhere or anywhere just to burn off this strange anxiety.

His playlist shuffled.

"Let Down" by Radiohead began to play.

He exhaled, long and shaky.

'Transport, motorways, and tramlines'

'Starting and then stopping..'

People suddenly ran past him. He blinked, stepping aside as a group hurried down the street.

He paused. Curious. Maybe something happened? A fire? A fight?

More people moved, and then he heard someone yell—“He’s going to jump!”

He froze.

Something in him twisted.

His feet moved before he told them to, trailing after the flow of people heading toward the noise.

'Taking off and landing'

'The emptiest of feelings…'

They stopped in front of a tall building, ten stories high.

There, silhouetted against the cold gleam of a flickering rooftop light, a lone figure clung to a railing.

Gasps and cries echoed below. Someone was screaming, “Please get down!” Others were on the phone, calling emergency lines. A few stood still, frozen in horror. A few—too many—had their phones out, recording.

Till’s eyes narrowed, trying to see the person’s face, but the distance and the dark made it impossible.

Still, something in his chest ached.

'Don’t get sentimental'

'It always ends up drivel..'

The figure moved slightly, swaying with the breeze. People below cried out again.

Till clenched his jaw.

The world suddenly felt far, far too quiet, except for the music bleeding into his ears.

And something deep inside him whispered that this wasn’t just a random tragedy.

Something was wrong.

'You know, you know where you are with…'

(Waiting, waiting drives you crazy)

Till stood motionless, the music in his ears growing louder, dissonant.

'You know where you are with…'

(Waiting drives you crazy)

'Floor collapsing'

(Endless repetition)

'Floating, bouncing back..'

(Endless come and leaving)

February 13th — 11:59 PM

The man let go.

He jumped.

It was almost graceful. His body leaned forward into nothingness, arms spread, surrendering to gravity like it was an old friend. And just before he fully disappeared into the air—

Till's breath hitched. The wind howled in that split second, tearing through the silence like a scream of its own. He saw it, vividly—

the way the figure tilted forward, weightless for a second too long—

the slow freefall—

and just before the body descended fully into the black, street-lit sky—

He saw the smile.

The man *smiled.*

Eyes closed, as though he had been waiting for this moment.

Like he was free.

'And one day I am gonna grow wings'

'A chemical reaction'

'Hysterical and useless'

'Hysterical and..'

CRACK.

THUD.

SPLAT.

The sound didn't seem real. It echoed grotesquely through the night air, bouncing off the walls and inside people's bones.

Till's heart stopped.

The body had struck the pavement just a few meters ahead. The crowd recoiled like waves from a rock.

Screams. Shrieks. Wails. Someone retched on the side. A child began crying, pulled back by their mother.

Blood was everywhere.

Thick pools spread quickly from beneath the body like water being poured from a pitcher. It coated the concrete in sticky, glistening red —

crawling toward the shoes of the bystanders—

soaking into the cracks of the pavement—

sprayed in spatters that painted the lower walls and even dotted a nearby motorcycle.

The man's body was twisted. Arms bent in unnatural angles, one leg broken so badly the bone jutted out, white gleaming sickly through the crimson. His face, now partially turned toward the sky, was caught in a blank expression, one eye swollen shut. His clothes clung, soaked dark.

The skull cracked, dark blood oozing slowly around the scalp like a

halo.

Snow began to fall, mocking in its gentleness, as if trying to veil the horror beneath. Flakes kissed the mangled body like a cruel joke, melting into blood that seeped from twisted limbs and shattered bones.

His chest didn't move. No rise. No fall.

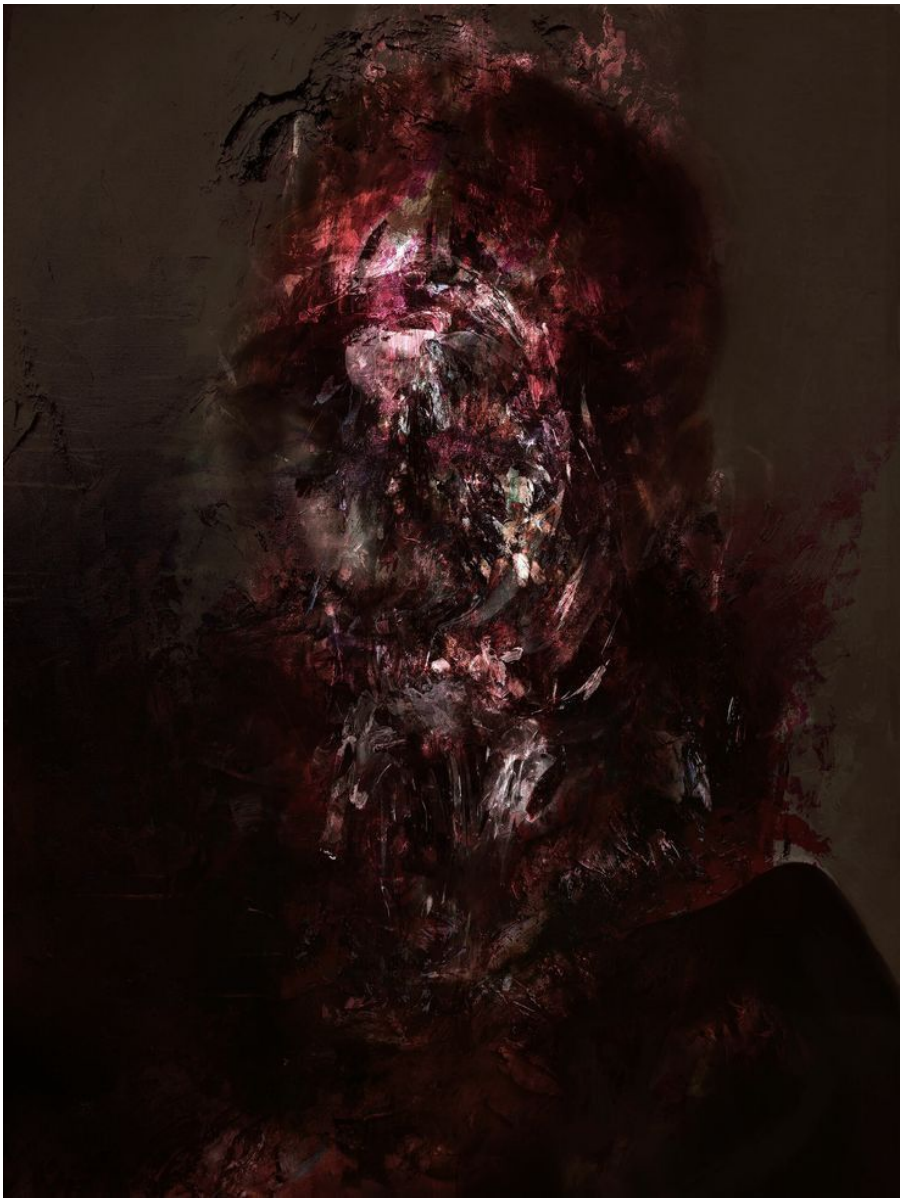
And Till's heart was screaming.

Because as people stepped back, as the crowd began to scatter and cry out, he got a clearer view.

That face—

even ruined, even broken, even still—

…it looked like Ivan.



Huh..?

'Crushed like a bug in the ground.

Chapter End Notes

12:00 AM - February 14
Valentine's Day.
Ivan's birthday.

The man jumped at 11:59 PM
...and landed at midnight.

Because most people said “red pill,” I chose to kill Ivan.
Just kidding. Was that Ivan, though?

I hope you noticed that Ivan is still struggling, that underneath everything, he’s not mentally okay.

I’m really sorry if this chapter felt brutal or left you disappointed. I hope it came through to you. Can you believe this whole chapter has 11k words?! Me too²..
Oh, and... listen to the songs, ehehe.

We’ve come this far. It’s been over a month since I started this ffanfiction!! Waaaah. Please, whether you’re craving the next chapter or unsure where this is headed, just trust me one more time, for the very last time.

I know you still have questions.
Was the author trippin’?
Who’s the unknown number?
(We’ll get answers in the next chapter.)

You can now listen to "Let Down" in real time! I finally figured it out how.. Ehem ehehe..

You can yell at me if you want, I totally get it. I'll embrace all your emotions. I too cried for 30 minutes writing the scene where his body breaks and falls apart. Listening to "Paratise" gave me the strength and courage to do all this.

Shoutout to Vivinos-nim□□□

I’LL SEE YOU IN THE 'FINAL' CHAPTER. I love y'allll. (*˃ᴗ˂*)

Chapter 25: Author's Yapping Session

Chapter Summary

> This chapter is not the real chapter!!ο·°(∘□∩□∘)°·ο
> This is just my yapping session BEFORE I POST THE FINAL CHAPTER. My little heart-to-heart. My emo ramble. My messy feelings spilled all over this page. You may ignore this!

Please answer this honestly, because I'd really love to know, soo.. am I the only one who thought that even in his most vulnerable moments, even when he's sick or dying, Ivan still wouldn't say I love you to Till?

Because really, that's how I've always seen him, throughout the entire series, that's the Ivan I visualize in canon. He'd carry all that trauma, all that yearning and pain, all the aching and remissing and silence… and still, he wouldn't say those words. He would say everything else. He'd speak in all the ways that meant "I love you." He'd wear every emotion on his face, show every gesture, do all the little things that scream love. But never say it. Never confess. Never speak it out loud. And to me… that is Ivan.

Am I the only one who thought that?

Anyway, before this series ends, I just want to say thank you. Truly. From the bottom of my heart.

Thank you so much. You've all been incredibly kind to me. This is my very first series, my first fanfiction ever, and honestly? I didn't know how AO3 even worked when I started. I used to never read the comments on other works before… but now, reading yours? Your comments? They changed everything.

Some of you literally read my mind. You caught things before they happened. You knew where the story was going, and I was sitting here thinking, “Oh shit! they know!”

Some of you even came up with plot ideas that honestly felt bigger than what I wrote. And I mean this in the best way, some of your thoughts are so good I want to ask… may I use them for my next series? Is that okay? Because they’re brilliant.

It’s kind of hard to admit, and I'm also ashamed but the angst in this story… it’s probably personal. It came from what I’ve been going through. (I mean, it's not based of my personal experience, yet—)

I’ve always been this… yap-yap-yap person. I talk a lot. I’m opinionated. I share things before thinking. And because of that, well.. I became, maybe, definitely… problematic and wrong. I was doxxed. Told to kill myself more than I could ever count. Called unspeakable things. That month was one of the worst nightmares of my life. I couldn’t function well. I was mentally drained, overwhelmed, and even terrified to open an app. To even exist online. Even breathing felt hard.

But this fic… it became my safe place.. I poured everything I had into it. Every emotion. Every tear. And it helped me, even just a little, to feel more okay. Writing this probably saved me a little. And what helped even more were your comments. Even the silly ones.

Some of you said you regretted reading because it hit too hard right before your exams (I’m so sorry). Some said it ruined their birthday because this should be your advance birthday gift (happy birthday to you and I’m sorry). Some said their eyes were puffy, that they couldn’t eat, that they screamed. Some binged the whole thing and didn’t sleep because they loved it so much.

And maybe I sound like I'm bragging, but every appreciation, kudos. Meant the world to me. It meant everything. You helped me feel okay. Maybe even a little whole. So whatever happens with this story, no matter how it ends, I'll do my best to make it feel worth it for you.

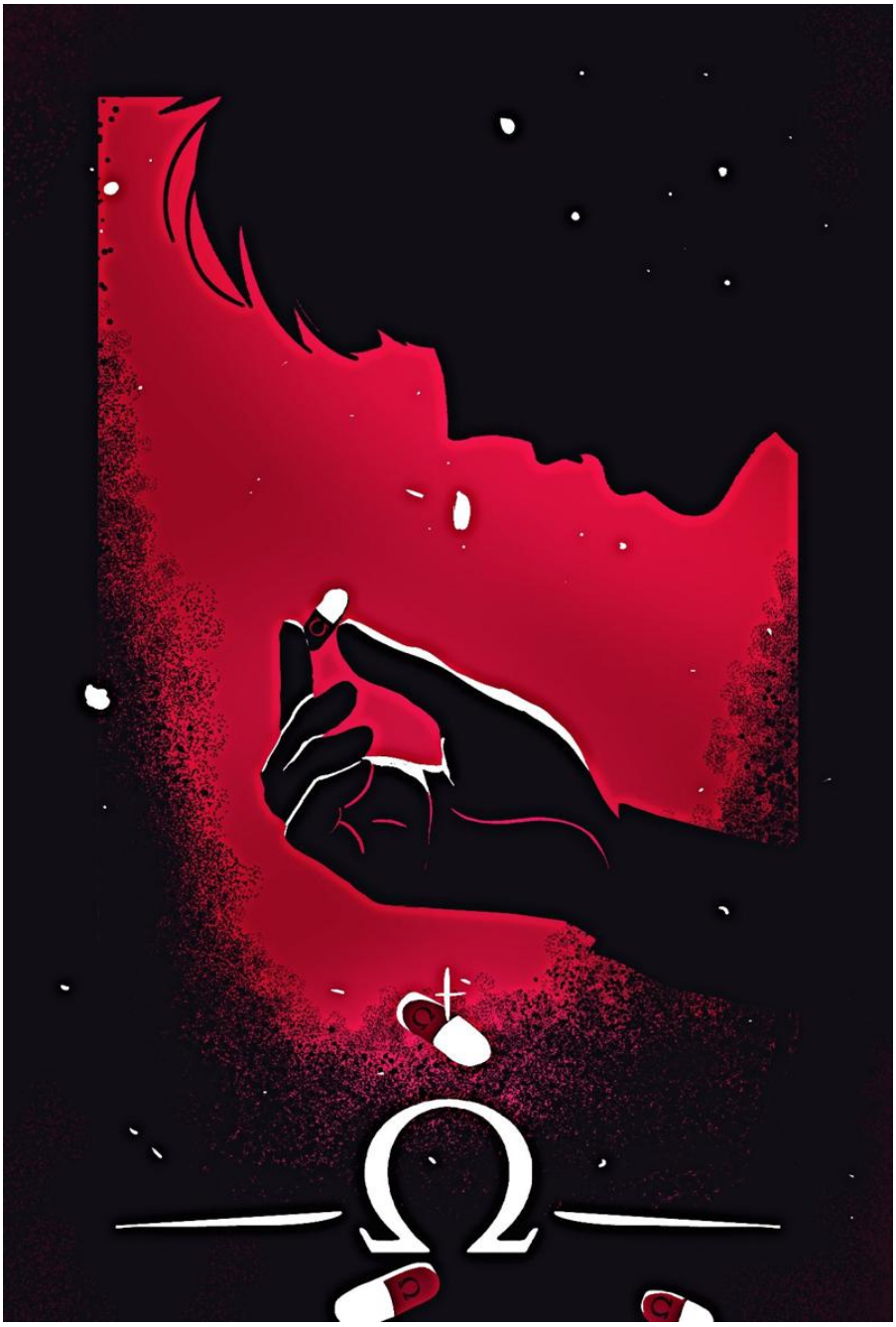
Oh, and don't worry about grammar in the comments. Please! I don't mind at all. As long as you're honest and the feeling is there? I'll be more than happy. Muah. (˘ ³˘)♥□

Thank you. Truly.

Writing fanfiction is not easy. It's terrifying and freeing and exhausting and beautiful. And maybe I should've done this way, way, way earlier. But I'm here now. And I love you all so much. T—T

GAH! Before I end this long-ass yapping, I can't believe how dare I almost forgot to mention where this fic was inspired from! I owe it all to a lovely artist on Twitter, **@ZOIzopolis-nim** who gave me permission to bring their lore to life. Waaaaa I owe them so much. It's too bad they deleted the full comic and the original cover. It was such a painful comic. But don't worry, I saved it. And I'll keep it safe.

Bye, byeeee! See you all in the finale❣□(ノノノ´ω`□□□)□❣



Chapter 26: Fly High

Chapter Summary

Would I change things?

Maybe not everything. Some pain is necessary. Some heartbreaks teach us how to love. But I think I'd wish to go back, not to erase what happened, but to hold on a little tighter. To say the words we never dared to say. To stay a little longer. To be softer. Kinder. Braver.

And maybe, just maybe, not to look away when someone smiles through their sadness.

What about you?

Would you change it... or would you live it all over again, tears, laughter, and all?

Chapter Notes

This chapter might break your heart, so
‼️TRIGGER WARNING‼️⚠️⚠️

‼️PLEASE READ WITH CAUTION‼️

It’s a long one, honestly, it probably should’ve been three separate chapters. But I chose to keep it whole..

Below will cover both Ivan and Till's POV.

This is the Final Chapter, the ending of everything we’ve walked through together. WAAAAHH, I hope it stays with you for a little while longer.

Thank you for reading. I’ll meet you again in the end note. ᕦ(ᵞ - ᵞ c)ᕤ

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He didn’t know where he was.

The ceiling was too white. The air too sterile. Something beeped

steadily behind his ears, quiet and mechanical. An irritating, rhythmic sound that became louder the more he noticed it.

His throat felt raw, as if something had been living in it. His limbs felt foreign. Heavy. As if someone had replaced his body with a barely functioning replica.

He tried to lift his hand and realized he couldn't feel his legs.

There were days when he thought the worst pain was waking up with nothing.

But that was a lie.

The worst pain was waking up surrounded by people who expected *everything* of you, people who looked at you like you were someone whole, someone *unchanged*. And knowing, deep in your marrow, that something inside you had died.

And Till… he was the sharpest reminder of all.

When Ivan first opened his eyes and heard his name *"Sir Ivan is awake!!"*

Ivan?

So that was his name.

The syllables felt cold in his mouth, like an old coat that didn't fit anymore. He repeated it to himself in the dark, as if forcing it would make it feel like it belonged to him.

He blinked slowly. His fingers twitched. He wasn't dead.

Not yet, anyway.

Then he appeared.

A silhouette in the doorway. The boy with a gray hair or was it silver? A defiant jaw and soft grief brimming behind those teal eyes.

Ivan remembered the first time he saw him standing in the hospital room, small and cracked open like someone had ripped his ribs apart and left the heart exposed. He hadn't even crossed the threshold yet, but Ivan felt him. Like static. Like gravity. Like a scream stuck in someone else's throat.

Who is he?

The guy stood there like the whole world had just broken open. His face cracked, his shoulders shaking, like seeing Ivan hurt him more than the coma ever had.

He didn't know why he's so afraid.

He didn't know him.

But his body *did*.

The moment their eyes met, Ivan's breath hitched. His throat went dry. And his chest clenched with something halfway between panic and longing.

He didn't know why he opened his arms. He didn't even *mean* to. But the moment the guy crashed into him, sobbing into his neck like the world had returned, Ivan felt it, something ancient inside him twitch. Something like memory, but crueler.

It felt right. Yet it terrified him.

Why was his heart screaming?

Why did his chest feel like it was splitting open with every breath this man took beside him?

And why.. God, why.. did he feel like the worst version of himself for not remembering anything at all?

He started to watch him.

In secret. In silence. In shame.

Till would sit beside him, reading, sketching, softly humming when he thought Ivan was asleep. Sometimes he cried when he thought Ivan wasn't looking. Ivan would feel the mattress dip under Till's weight, hear his stifled sniffles, and watch the way his shoulders trembled.

And god—*god*—he looked beautiful in those moments. Not just in appearance, but in the way pain didn't make him bitter. The way he still stayed. The way he carried more love in his exhausted frame than anyone Ivan had ever met.

Days passed. Maybe hours. Ivan couldn’t keep track. But the man stayed.

He helped him eat. Pushed his wheelchair. Spoke to the nurses. Held his hand when his body burned from physical therapy. Comforted him silently when Ivan puked into paper bags, ashamed and dizzy.

Ivan tried to make him go.

Ivan tried to be cruel.

He wanted to be.

Ivan screamed. He yelled. He threw the tray. He pushed Till against the door once and told him to stop looking at him like that. Leave. Disappear.

But Till didn't. He just got up.

Smiled.

Came back the next day.

Why?

Why was he still here?

Why are you doing this for someone who doesn’t even remember your name without being told?

Ivan hated himself more with every second.

Till would held water to Ivan's lips. Cleaned his vomit. Rubbed his back during the seizures. Picked him up when his legs failed. Sang when the room was too quiet.

Why?

It made Ivan *sick.*

He didn’t deserve it. Not from someone so bright, so stubborn, so stupid.

He yelled. He pushed. He cursed. Not because he hated them.

But because he hated himself.

Every kindness from the silver-haired man was like a knife. Every soft smile was like a riddle. Every careful touch. Every moment of unshakable loyalty.

Why?

Why does it hurts so much?

He wanted to scream at him. Shake him.

I’m not who you think I am.

Ivan hated it. All of it.

The pity in everyone's eyes. The way people said his name like it meant something. The weight of their expectations. The smiles. The nods. The hope.

The hope was the worst part.

Everyone was hoping he'd just "get better."

Everyone was hoping the real Ivan would just come back.

But he felt rotted.

Like a body dragged back to life against its will.

Even Till one who stayed by his bedside, who never pushed him too hard, who held his hand when he couldn't sleep, who smiled even when Ivan was at his worst.

Especially him.

He'd look at Ivan like he was still there. Like something sacred wasn't missing.

And Ivan…

He tried to match it. He tried to smile back. To accept the help. But it felt wrong. His body didn't fit right. His voice didn't sound like his own. And every time Till reached for him with warmth, it felt like acid against Ivan's skin.

Because he didn’t remember.

He didn’t remember this love.

And yet, his body did. His chest ached when Till walked away. His hands twitched with guilt when he made him cry. His eyes burned when he watched Till pretend to be okay.

Why won’t you leave me?

Why won’t you give up already?

He lashed out again and again. Not out of cruelty, but because he didn’t know how else to survive the shame of being someone else inside a body everyone seemed to know.

They kept calling him "Ivan."

But that person didn’t feel like him.

The real Ivan, the one this man cried for, sang for, held like something precious was gone.

And what remained was a hollowed-out thing that didn’t deserve those soft glances. That didn’t deserve the way Till whispered his name like it was a prayer.

So he flinched. He barked. He recoiled.

But even then—Till stayed.

And that hurt more than anything else.

Because he didn't understand what he was supposed to be… if not him.

And if this wasn't *him*…

Then who the hell was he?

At first, the text meant nothing.

A number he didn't recognize, no name attached. He was skeptical. Thought it was spam. Ignored it.

But it came again.

[Unknown] : *Don't forget what you are.*

He stared at it, blinking, unsure. His fingers hovered over the screen, then locked the phone without replying.

And again:

[Unknown] : *Is he still pretending that he cares?*

The words hit like a hammer, even if he didn’t know why they hurt so much.

He told himself it was just some sick prank. A glitch. A scam. But they kept coming.

And around the same time... he started to dream.

Fragments. Blurry scenes that slipped through his fingers the moment he opened his eyes. But there were voices. Heat. Pain. Blood. A hand reaching for someone. A voice screaming something he couldn’t decipher.

He woke up gasping. Cold sweat clinging to his body like second skin.

And then the next day, the message again:

[Unknown] : *Don’t pretend now.*

You know what you did.

This time, he didn’t open it right away. He pressed the phone screen to his chest and just sat there, unmoving, staring out the window.

His head throbbed. Not from the text. Not from the memory. From the weight of hiding it.

He didn’t tell anyone.

Especially not Till.

One day, he looked at Till with venom and spat, “Why are you still here?”

He’d expected anger.

He wanted it.

But Till had only offered a weak, crooked smile, knuckles bruised from catching him again and again. “Because you’re still here.”

Ivan wanted to throw up again.

He thought of the man he must’ve been before.

Before the blank slate.

Before the pain.

There were nights he would wake up sweating, dreaming of hands clawing at his throat, of drowning in red. Of screaming silently through bloodied teeth. He didn’t know why.

Till would sit beside him then. Calm. Gentle.

“Do you want to talk?”

Ivan would shake his head.

“Okay,” Till would whisper, brushing his fingers through his hair.

Why are you comforting me like I’m someone worth saving?

Why do I want to push you away and pull you close at the same time?

Why do I feel like your tears are mine?

Ivan started counting things.

The number of times Till smiled even after Ivan snapped at him.
The number of times he picked up the food tray Ivan shoved away.
The number of times he brushed Ivan’s hair away when it fell into his face.
The number of times he looked at him like he *still mattered.*

Each tally cut deeper.

Because Ivan didn’t deserve it.
He didn’t remember the inside jokes. The fights. The late nights. The music. The affection.
He didn’t remember the *him* that Till knew.

And he hated that man.

He hated the version of *Ivan* that Till held in his heart so dearly, the one who was strong and sure and whole. The one who Till trusted with his rawest pieces, who Till once stared at like he was someone worth staying for.

Ivan watched Till's eyes light up when he made a joke. When he acknowledged him. When he asked questions instead of retreating. That look, the spark Till always gave him when he felt "seen."

But Ivan was a fraud now.

And he was jealous of himself.

Jealous of the memory of a boy who existed in Till's head, tall and proud and whole. The one Ivan now felt like a stranger to.

Because he could never measure up to that memory.

Still… Ivan tried.

Not because he remembered.

But because he felt.

Because when Till talked, his voice made something inside him ache in a way no stranger ever could.

Because when Till sang quietly, believing Ivan was asleep, Ivan

wanted to be the reason for those songs.

Because on the day he walked again, truly walked without help, Till didn't cheer. He didn't shout or grin like a fool.

He turned away and comforted his mother, Io, first, pretending he was fine. But Ivan saw the way his shoulders trembled. Saw how his eyes glistened even as he smiled.

Ivan watched it all.

And he thought...

If it takes everything in me to get back to that version he knew, I'll do it.

He would bleed for it.

He already was.

His muscles screamed. Every step felt like fire in his veins. His mind was frayed from dreams that didn't belong to him. His inbox was full of messages that crawled beneath his skin and made him sick.

But none of that mattered when Till smiled.

When Till leaned in.

And time, fragile and cruel, bent around them.

His breath ghosted against Ivan's skin, his lips so close they brushed the edge of memory. For a second, Ivan swore the sea fell silent. There was only the frantic beat of his own heart, loud, broken, afraid.

Then it came back to him.

The bar.

The dim lights.

The bitter taste of alcohol.

The sharp sting in Till's eyes after Mizi's rejection.

Ivan remembered the sound of Till's laugh breaking into a sob.

The way his fingers shook as they clutched Ivan's jacket.

And then...

A kiss.

Shaky. Warm. Desperate.

Ivan had kissed him back.

Not because he thought it would fix anything.

Because, in that moment, they were both breaking, and it was the only thing that didn't hurt.

And now, here on this cold beach beneath an endless sky, Till was leaning in to kiss him again.

Ivan still didn't know why.

His heart shattered all over again.

Not like this.

Not again.

So he turned away.

"...What are you doing?"

He didn’t miss the way Till flinched. The flush of shame. The lie that stumbled out with shaking breath.

“There was a rock. I slipped.”

There were no rocks.

But Ivan didn’t call him out.

Because letting him lie was kinder than hearing him say, *I don’t know why I almost kissed you.*

Kinder than admitting he didn’t love Ivan.

Kinder than facing the truth that maybe he never had.

Ivan let it go.

Even as something inside him shattered.

Because remembering now—

This way—

Like this—

Hurt more than forgetting ever did.

He didn’t know what woke him.

Maybe it was the cold. Maybe it was the nightmare. Maybe it was the taste of bile still burning the back of his throat.

But he was walking. Moving.

The night air gnawed at his skin as he stumbled down quiet streets, directionless, driven by something he couldn't name.

The only thing he was certain of was the ache twisting through his gut, the memory of that pill on his tongue, the sour metallic tang of it cracking between his teeth, and the burn of it clawing down his throat like punishment.

His body convulsing. Skin drenched in sweat. Lungs collapsing in on themselves. He remembered curling over the toilet, vomiting until nothing came up but blood and spit, until his throat screamed raw. He remembered how the mirror didn't show him anymore, just a ghost, sunken and shaking, whose eyes burned red from crying.

And for what?

He remembered now.

Fragments.

Scattered shards slotting into place.

To change.

To stop being something he was born into.

To escape the word that haunted him.

Alpha.

But that wasn't what he wanted.

He wanted—needed—to become the opposite. Something smaller. Gentler. Something that Till might hold with affection instead of distance.

Something that Till could love.

The word *Omega* echoed in his mind again.

And he nearly threw up on the sidewalk.

Because along with the memory came the pain. The way the word made him hate himself. The way his own reflection became unbearable. How every glance in the mirror was a reminder of what he could never be.

That was why the messages started again.

That was why the unknown number mocked him.

Because they remembered what he tried to forget.

And now… he remembered too.

He didn't recall how he got to Till's house. His feet carried him, almost on instinct.

When he finally stood at the foot of Till's bed, something in him broke.

There he was, curled under the blanket, sound asleep. His face lit by the faint blue hue of the snowy night filtering in through the curtains. Peaceful. Gentle.

Beautiful.

The sight made Ivan feel sick all over again.

He'd forgotten how much he ached for this boy.

The man who never left. Who stood at his side through the screams and the silences. Who held him, smiled at him, carried him through every ugly part of recovery. Who never once looked away, even when Ivan screamed in his face or pushed him down.

How could someone love that deeply without expecting anything in return?

Ivan didn't deserve that. He didn't deserve Till.

He hadn't for a long time.

Till stirred then.

His lashes fluttered against his cheeks, and Ivan froze. Just stood there, looming, breath caught in his throat. He probably looked like a ghost in the shadows—broad and silent, eyes burning from everything

he couldn't say.

Then Till jolted up, panic in his voice.

"Fuck!"

Ivan blinked. His name was spat out next.

"Shitty Ivan," Till muttered, half-asleep, groaning in annoyance. It stung, but Ivan welcomed it. He deserved it.

"When the hell did you get here? Did mom let you in?"

"I have a spare key," Ivan replied quietly.

Right. Of course. Till had forgotten.

He collapsed back into bed, groaning, voice soft. "You scared the hell out of me."

Ivan didn't reply.

Till looked at him again, and something shifted. His sharp eyes softened just a little when he noticed the hollowness in Ivan's face, the way his shoulders were pulled too tight, how dark the shadows under his eyes had become.

But he didn't push.

Just patted the empty space beside him and muttered, "Sleep."

Ivan moved like a machine. Quiet. Empty. He lay down beside Till, feeling the warmth from his body seep through the blankets like a balm he didn't deserve.

Till fell asleep within seconds. Breathing slow. Mouth slightly parted. A soft, silly snore following.

And Ivan… stayed awake.

Eyes open.

Heart raw.

He stared at Till, memorizing every line. The faint scar near his brow, the way his lip curled slightly when he exhaled. The slow rise and fall of his chest.

Ivan's hand lifted, hovering just above Till's throat.

Fingers trembling.

There was no malice. No rage.

Just grief. Deep and choking.

He didn't know if he wanted to strangle the past or cradle it. If he wanted to pull Till closer or push him far enough to never be seen again.

The urge to destroy himself had returned, and it terrified him. Because part of him had almost done it again.

His hand hovered, indecisive.

It looked violent.

But it was mourning.

It was the physical ache of longing to be held by someone who will never love you the way you love them.

Till murmured something in his sleep, a soft, meaningless sound, and it cracked through the silence like a whip.

Ivan retreated, his hand falling back like a tide pulling away from shore.

He turned, curled slightly, facing Till with wide, exhausted eyes.

He remembered now.

Why he had loved him.

Why he wanted to change.

Why the pain was still blooming like bruises inside his chest.

And as the snow outside thickened and the world grew quiet, Ivan stayed still, watching the one person he could never stop needing.

When Till invited him to the concert, Ivan almost said *no*.

He didn't say it out loud, of course. Just nodded, smiled, made some dry comment about hoping there'd be a seat in the back so he could hide. Till rolled his eyes and told him *shut up, just show up.*

So, he did.

He showed up.

But what he didn't say, what he couldn't say, was how much he didn't feel like he belonged. Not anymore.

The campus buzzed with life. Ivan hadn't seen it this loud in weeks. Maybe months. People were talking, running, screaming about how ALNST was back, Till was back. Banners with their band name were hanging from balconies.

There were stickers of Till's face on students' bags. Someone even had a pin with "TILL THE END" scribbled across it.

He had no idea Till was this famous.

The venue was already full when he arrived with Mizi and Sua. The moment they stepped inside, light swallowed them—stage lights, spotlight, crowd buzz, camera flashes. Ivan felt like he had stepped into someone else's world. It was too big. Too loud. Too warm. He hadn't realized how much of the world Till owned when he was onstage.

He stood near the front, only because Mizi dragged him there. She handed him a ridiculous light stick and wore a headband with Till's face on it.

He would've laughed if he didn't feel like he was choking.

Then the lights dimmed.

The crowd roared.

And Till stepped into view.

Ivan stopped breathing.

It was like seeing him for the first time.

Till, drenched in black eyeliner and glittering sweat, guitar in hand, sharp mouth set in a line of focus, dressed like the fucking star he

always was and never admitted. His black nails caught the light. His hair was tousled perfectly, not too styled, just chaotic enough to look like he didn't care, though Ivan knew he did.

He looked like he belonged up there.

Ivan had never seen this version of Till.

Alive. Electric.

And when he opened his mouth to sing, Ivan felt his heart twist in its cage.

"I've been holding onto pieces,

Swimming in the deep end…"

Till's voice hit like cold water. Raw. Vulnerable. Stunning.

It pulled Ivan apart in ways he wasn't prepared for. Every lyric a memory he didn't own but felt anyway. Every note landed in the spaces between his ribs and stayed there, ringing.

Ivan found himself leaning forward.

Couldn't stop watching the way Till's lips moved around each word. Couldn't stop watching the way his fingers clenched around the mic, like the words were barely holding him together.

Then Till opened his eyes.

He was searching for someone.

Ivan felt that pang of instinct—*he's looking for you*—but he didn't dare believe it.

And when Till's gaze swept past him—

For a moment, Ivan thought he was looking at Mizi.

His heart clenched, sudden and sharp.

It didn't hurt the way it used to.

No, the ache was quieter now. Familiar. Like an old bruise being pressed, just enough to remember it's still there. Ivan didn't flinch. He didn't even blink. He just stood there and let the pain fill the spaces inside him.

It was a strange comfort.

Because he'd already let go.

He'd already mourned the version of himself that used to think he could be loved like that.

Then Till looked at him.

Their eyes locked.

And Ivan—

He didn’t know if Till could see it, but in that moment, he smiled. Wide. Open. Without restraint.

Because how could he not?

Till was shining.

More than ever. More than he ever remembered. And for that moment, he wasn’t the Ivan who broke. He wasn’t the Ivan who forgot. He was just someone who got to witness it.

He laughed when Mizi shoved a light stick into his hand and told him to wave harder. He smiled when she nudged him and shouted “He's looking at you!” and he pretended not to hear it. Sua filmed everything, stone-faced but clearly enjoying herself.

Ivan soaked it in quietly.

He didn’t cheer like the others.

Didn’t scream or wave.

He just smiled. Maybe laughed?

Because maybe this was enough.

Maybe he didn't need to be part of it anymore.

Maybe Till didn't need him to be.

And that thought… it should've broken him.

It should've shattered every inch of his chest.

But instead—

He just breathed. Felt relief as the resignation drown in him.

Let the music wash over him.

And thought,

You made it.

You're whole again.

He watched the final chorus roll out of Till like a prayer.

"'Cause I'm needing a little bit of love…"

And he let himself believe that Till was singing it to the stars, to the crowd, to himself.

Not to Ivan.

When the lights dimmed and the crowd exploded into cheers, Ivan didn't cheer. Lost in the way Till bowed, sweaty and breathless, cheeks pink from the heat, eyes glowing.

He whispered something only he could hear.

I'm proud of you.

Everything of you.

He texted Till hours before the concert ended.

Just four words:

[Ivan] : *Come to the rooftop.*

He thought about deleting it.

Then thought about rewriting it.

Adding something casual. Adding a joke. *Maybe bring snacks, you show-off rockstar or I owe you a drink*. Something stupid. Something that would make Till roll his eyes and mutter idiot under his breath.

But he didn’t.

Because it wasn’t just another message.

It was the one.

He’d been on the rooftop for what felt like hours. The cold had already sunk into his bones, but he didn’t mind. He welcomed it. The wind was sharp, the night air bitter, but the moon was full and white like a watching eye.

He leaned against the railing, eyes half-lidded, every limb aching from something deeper than exhaustion.

Till was coming.

And this time, Ivan wouldn’t run.

This would be the last time.

Not a dramatic goodbye. Not a confession. Just… the final time he would let himself hold him.

He only wanted to remember how he felt.

And maybe… how Till felt in his arms one last time.

He heard footsteps before he saw him.

The door opened. The air shifted.

And then there he was.

Till. Out of breath, glitter fading beneath a hoodie, hair damp against his temple, his cheeks pink from running. He raised a single finger in front of him like a warning.

“Let me catch my breath.”

Ivan smiled.

“How lucky am I?” he murmured. “The star of the night is here with me.”

Till approached slowly. His presence, always a storm—this time, soft like dusk. Sharp, but still warm. He was talking—sarcastic, annoyed, fond.

He asked *Why did you call? and Should I ignore you then?* in that voice that made Ivan want to laugh and sob all at once.

But all Ivan wanted was to see him.

Like this.

One last time.

The conversation blurred a little after that.

Something about being proud. About not worrying.

Till asked, *What do you want for Valentine's?*

And Ivan almost answered honestly.

I want more time.

I want to start again.

I want to forget everything that kept me from loving you the way you deserved.

But he didn't say that.

He only smiled and said, "I don't know."

Then the phone rang.

Till pulled away just a bit. But that space was enough to break something inside Ivan he didn't know was still intact.

He listened to the muffled voice on the line. Watched Till frown. Watched him slowly return to the present.

"I need to go," Till said.

And Ivan moved.

Arms around him.

For the very last time.

One final, quiet, permanent memory.

He pulled him close. Felt his heartbeat against his chest. Held him like something he wasn't ready to let go of.

He placed a kiss on Till's temple, not because he wanted to be romantic. To demand something. Meant something. Risked something.

No.

But because that's where Till always carried his worry.

And maybe, if he kissed it gently enough, it would go away.

He kissed that soft skin like he was sealing a letter *he'd never send.*

Thank you.

Thank you for not turning away. When I didn't even know what I looked like anymore.

Thank you for every second you made it seem like I was whole. Even

if you didn't mean to. Even if I was never really anything close.

Thank you for making me feel like I was enough. Just for a while.

And I'm sorry.

He shut his eyes.

It hurt to think about how easy it had been, for Till to be kind. And how hard it had become to keep pretending it didn't matter.

Till didn't speak. Didn't pull back. Just stood there, held.

And Ivan thought—

Everything will be alright, Till.

Because it will.

Because he did not regret loving Till.

He didn't regret any of it.

Not the fights. Not the silence. Not the hospital. Not the aching. Not even the pain of now.

He had loved.

And been loved back in fragments.

That was enough.

And as Till turned and waved, disappearing into the stairwell, Ivan whispered—

“Farewell.”

His voice didn’t shake.

But his chest did.

The moon sat high above him, cruel in its stillness.

Ivan stayed for a while, arms still curled loosely around where Till had been.

He closed his eyes. Inhaled what was left of him.

February 13 – 11:15 PM

The city looked so small from up here.

Lights blinked in neat little rows. Tiny people moved like they had somewhere to go. The streets hummed, still alive even at this hour. Down below, the world continued, utterly unaware of the boy standing on the rooftop of the tallest building, staring over the edge like it was a mirror.

Ivan had never felt more awake.

The wind bit into his skin. Cold. Sharp. Perfect.

It felt like peace.

He had left no letter. No voice message. No note on his bed. He didn't say goodbye to Till, or to Mizi, or to the bandmates he'd grown to smile at from afar.

But there was one thing he did.

He replied.

To that unknown number that had been haunting him for weeks. The one that poked and prodded and knew more than it should.

Tonight, finally Ivan had written back.

[Ivan] : *Alright. You won.*

He stared at the screen for a long moment, before powering it off. His phone slipped back into his coat pocket, quiet and dead.

He felt… calm.

That’s what scared him most.

He wasn't crying. Wasn't pacing. Wasn’t doubting.

No rage. No confusion. Just a stillness that had finally swallowed the storm.

This was his gift.

To himself.

To the world.

To Till.

He looked up at the stars. The sky was too clear for something like this to happen.

But maybe that’s why he chose today.

Because he wanted to be remembered under a beautiful sky.

Snow was starting to fall. Soft and gentle. It almost made him laugh.

Romantic.

How fitting.

Happy birthday.. to me.

He chuckled at the thought.

February 14.

The day people celebrated hearts. Love. Pink paper cutouts and chocolate and secret confessions.

But for him—it would be a *perfect* ending.

He had given everything he could. More than he should. He had clawed himself back from the pit with bloody hands and a body that refused to move. For Till. Always for Till.

But what else could he give now?

He would always be… something broken.

And still, despite it all, despite every lie he fed himself. He loved Till.

Till with his loud mouth and sharp teal eyes.

Till who burned like sunlight and never noticed the boy who stood in the shade.

Till who called him back from the brink without knowing it.

My *paradise*.

And me?

A *parasite*.

That was all he had ever been.

Clinging. Siphoning. Wanting too much. Giving too little. Taking and taking and still asking for more.

Even in death, he would stay that way, buried inside Till's memories like rot in a rose garden. Maybe Till would hate him. Maybe he'd cry. Maybe he'd remember him as something that hurt.

That was okay.

That was more than enough.

"If you were the sun," Ivan whispered to the sky, voice breaking as wind howled past his ears,

"I'd be Icarus."

Like a fool, I flew too close.

As my wax wings melted, you stood there shining.

But even if it was for a moment… we were together…

He took one final breath.

“I had you.”

February 13 – 11:59 PM

He stepped up onto the ledge.

The city stretched below him like the open palm of a god.

He laughed.

It wasn’t bitter. It wasn’t loud.

It was… relieved.

Finally.

As the wind howled and the sirens wailed below and the crowd began to form—

He smiled.

Then he fell.

Let gravity take him.

Wind tore at him. His coat flapped violently. The world spun.

But for a moment—

It felt like flying.

Freedom.

I loved you, and I pray you'll never know.

Forgive me.

This is the only way I could let go.

He saw the moon above him. The stars. It looked fragile as it should be.

So quiet. So far away.

This is paradise.

And as the ground raced to meet him, Ivan laughed again.

Not because he wanted to die.

But because even now, even in this final moment—

He had loved.

And that was all he ever wanted.

He closed his eyes.

And just before the wind stole him completely, a memory found him.

A warm one. Tucked deep. From a time when he still believed he could have everything.

They were only children.

It was a humid afternoon, cicadas buzzing in the trees, their clothes damp with sweat. The grass reached up to their knees behind Till's neighborhood, wild and overgrown, the kind of place no one really went. But they did, because Ivan followed Till everywhere back then, like a shadow with messy hair and bandaged knees.

Till had his sketchpad again, sitting cross-legged on a rock, furiously scribbling something Ivan couldn't see. Ivan pretended not to watch him.

Pretended he wasn't thinking about how pretty Till looked in the sunlight, gray hair sticking to his cheeks, sharp teal eyes squinting at his page, lips slightly parted as he chewed on his pencil.

Ivan sat in the grass nearby, plucking small white and purple flowers from between the weeds. He didn't know what kind they were. He didn't care.

He'd seen it in a cartoon once. A flower crown.

It looked easy.

But it wasn't.

His fingers were too big. The stems kept snapping. The flowers drooped or tangled. It looked more like a crumpled knot than anything regal. Still, he kept going. He wanted it to be perfect. For Till.

Even if it wasn't.

Even if he didn't know why his chest hurt when Till smiled, or why he kept staring at his stupid sketchpad like it held the answers to everything.

He didn't understand love then. Only that he wanted to make Till happy.

That had always been enough.

When the crown was done, or as done as it could be, he stood and approached slowly. Quietly.

Till didn't look up.

Ivan hesitated. Then he leaned forward and gently—so gently—placed the crooked crown on Till's head.

“What's this—?” Till grumbled, reaching up.

“It’s a crown,” Ivan muttered. His cheeks burned. “You’re the king of… I don’t know. Grumpytown. But you can be the queen if you want.”

Till gave him a flat look, one eyebrow twitching.

“This is crooked."

“I know.”

“It’s falling apart.”

“Obviously."

Till stared at him, then exhaled a long sigh.

“…Dumbass.”

But then—he smiled.

Tired and small and a little annoyed, like he didn’t want to smile but couldn’t help it.

And Ivan’s heart fluttered.

It fluttered and twisted and bloomed, like those wildflowers, like something he didn’t have words for yet.

And as he fell now, through the frozen night air, the lights of the city blurring past him, that smile replayed behind his eyes.

Till, wearing that awful crown, calling him weird. Laughing later when it fell off and Ivan scrambled to put it back on. Shoving him and calling him a loser, but with eyes so soft they betrayed him.

That was the moment Ivan had known he was doomed.

That he would never want anyone else.

And as the air thinned, and the lights below grew brighter, Ivan smiled through the tears leaking from the corners of his eyes.

'How nice it was... to love you.'

He whispered into the rushing wind:

“Good bye, Till.”

CRACK.

The world welcomed him home.

The city kept glowing.

The snow kept falling.

And his body… has finally stopped hurting.

That...

That sight... it shattered something deep inside Till. His legs trembled uncontrollably, each step toward the broken body feeling like a heavy toll, as if with every movement life itself was draining away.

The world around him blurred, distant voices and screams becoming faint echoes behind a suffocating fog.

Someone reached out, trying to stop him, but Till's desperation surged like a violent tide. He shoved the person aside with more force than he knew he had, eyes fixed, heart pounding wildly in his chest.

He wanted to say something but the sound was trapped, lodged somewhere deep in his throat, tangled in shock and grief.

Step by agonizing step, he moved closer. Pools of thick, dark blood glistened cruelly in the harsh daylight, spreading like wounds on the concrete floor. The metallic scent was sharp in his nostrils, burning as it mingled with the cold air.

When he finally stood right beside the corpse, the horrifying truth became unbearable.

It was Ivan.

Broken, lifeless, soaked in blood and pain.

His breath hitched, lungs struggling to pull in air that felt suddenly too heavy. His legs gave way beneath him, collapsing to his knees as numbness and dread overwhelmed his body.

With trembling hands, Till reached out, fingers brushing the cold, bloodied skin of Ivan's face. The familiar contours now marred by the grotesque violence of the fall.

And then it burst out of him—a raw, guttural scream, wrenching from deep within, ugly and shattered, a sound filled with unbearable grief and helplessness.

"AAAAAAAKH—AAAAAAAGAAA KH"

His wretched scream tore through the chaos, echoing off the walls, a haunting lullaby to a life slipping away.

People around him panicked, their shouts mixing with his cries, but no one dared come closer.

Till clung to Ivan's broken body, rocking slightly as if the scream alone could somehow pull him back from the edge, that this was not death but sleep, and he was just trying to wake him.

The sound stretched, long and pained, filled with a sorrow too heavy for words.

The sobs racked his body like convulsions—wild, unrelenting. Till couldn't control it anymore. He didn't want to. The grief spilled out of him in broken, choking waves as he clung to Ivan's bloodied form like a lifeline, burying his face into the cold chest that once carried a

heartbeat just for him.

His fingers trembled violently, digging into the soaked fabric of Ivan's coat, now torn and soaked through with thick, red blood. The iron stench coated his skin, his breath, his tongue. It was everywhere. His face was smeared with it, his hands covered, but he didn't care.

Why? Why did it come to this?

So many questions screamed inside his head, like sharp glass rattling in a jar.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. Not when he had just seen that smile days ago under the moonlight. Not when he held Ivan in his arms like everything would be okay. Not when Valentine's Day—his birthday—was today.

Not when you.. you promised me.

The scene around him felt surreal, like he was trapped in some twisted play staged by fate itself.

The snow continued to fall gently, so softly, so cruelly—flakes drifting onto Ivan's bloodied face and melting into the warm red. White and red. Peace and violence. A bitter contrast.

Till looked down again. Ivan's eyes—once so bright, so stubbornly alive, now stared blankly, hollow and glazed. But somehow, inexplicably, he looked... *free*. Free in a way that made Till's chest cave in. Like death had unshackled him. Like the pain was gone now.

“No… no no no,” Till whispered hoarsely, over and over between sobs. “Why do you look so happy…”

And then he noticed something horrifying. A gash along Ivan’s skull, jagged and wide. The fall had cracked his head open, and for a moment. Till thought—his brain... *it’s going to spill out.*

Till gagged.

He let out another strangled sound, half scream, half sob, and instinctively tried to cradle Ivan’s head as if to protect what was left, to preserve even a shred of him. The snow was settling on them both, creating a ghostly halo around the blood.

The world felt like it was spinning, everything too bright, too loud—and yet, too far away.

Then he heard it. *Clicks*. Recording sounds. He slowly raised his head.

People were taking videos. Phones aimed straight at him. Like he was some kind of spectacle, a madman cradling a corpse, painted in blood and screaming.

His voice cracked with fury, desperation, and grief.

“STOP!” he screamed, throat raw, spittle flying. “STOP FILMING!”

His whole body trembled. “Please... just... stop...” His voice broke. No one stopped. Some people even zoomed in. Someone laughed nervously in the background.

Then his eyes caught something in the crowd.

A blonde guy.

He looked… off. Not shocked. Not disgusted. He wasn’t filming. He just stood there, rigid, pale, his face twisted into something unreadable. Something broken. Like he knew Ivan. Like he was mourning too.

Their eyes met.

Till’s breath caught. The blonde guy flinched, visibly startled by the connection—and then, like smoke, vanished into the sea of people.

Till’s eyes widened. No—no, don’t run—

A fire lit inside him, irrational and blazing. Why did he look like that? Why did he look like he KNEW? Rage mixed with grief like oil and fire.

“HEY!” Till shouted hoarsely, still kneeling, still clutching Ivan’s body as though he’d never let go. His voice echoed across the square, full of desperation and fury.

“HEY!! COME BACK!!” he bellowed again, madness laced in every word. “DON’T RUN! YOU KNEW HIM, DIDN’T YOU?!”

His voice cracked on the last word.

But the man was gone. The crowd swallowed him like he was never there.

Till screamed again, raw, ragged, clinging tighter to Ivan's cold frame.

And Till didn't care if he looked insane. Because in that moment—blood-covered, broken, crumpled on the frozen ground with the body of the only person he'd ever—

In that moment, Till had already lost everything.

The whine of sirens tore through the air like a distant scream, too late, too far, too slow.

Finally, the ambulance arrived, its red lights spinning violently against the soft snow and shocked silence. A small crowd had gathered, but none dared go near the pool of blood where a young man clung to another, soaked and smeared in crimson.

The paramedics rushed in with urgency, but the moment they saw the scene, they hesitated.

It didn't look like a suicide.

It looked like a massacre.

And then there was a man cradling him like a child would cradle a shattered doll.

They approached cautiously.

“Sir—sir, please, we need to take him now,” one of them said gently, his voice barely audible over the wind and the murmurs of the crowd.

Till didn’t respond.

He didn’t look up.

He was rocking slightly, his arms around Ivan’s chest, one bloodied hand cradling the back of his head, trying to keep the pieces in place, as if he could stop him from breaking further. Blood soaked through his sleeves, his jeans, even his face, his tears indistinguishable from the streaks of red.

Another medic stepped closer and knelt down beside him.

“Sir, I know this is hard. But we need to—he’s—please…”

Till finally raised his eyes.

Wide. Glazed. Cracked.

They weren’t eyes anymore. They were voids—haunted and unblinking.

“No,” he whispered, hoarse. “Don’t… don’t touch him. He’ll fall apart…”

“We won’t let that happen,” the medic said. His voice was kind, strained. “We’ll be gentle. But we need to move him. We’ll take you both, okay?”

The other paramedic reached forward slowly, carefully, inch by inch, but the moment his hand touched Ivan’s shoulder—

“NO!”

Till screamed, pulling Ivan closer, holding the broken body against his chest like a shield.

“DON’T TOUCH HIM—DON’T TOUCH HIM!”

The medic flinched back.

“He’s falling—he’s falling apart! I have to hold him, please—he’ll break if you—if you move him—” Till’s words collapsed into sobs again, shaking his entire frame.

The team shared a look. This wasn’t just grief. This was devastation. Delirium.

“Okay,” the first medic said softly. “Okay, we won’t take him from you.”

Instead, they adjusted.

They brought a stretcher.

Together, three of them worked slowly, building a plan with their hands and eyes. Gently, they slipped support boards under Ivan's body, never pulling him away, never separating them. Every movement was made with reverence, like handling glass. Like sacred things.

And when they finally lifted him, Till didn't let go. He wouldn't.

So they took him too.

They placed him on the stretcher with Ivan, curled around the corpse, a human shield made of tears and trembling limbs. They strapped them both down, just enough to keep them from sliding, and covered them both with thermal blankets, though the cold wasn't what Till felt anymore.

The doors of the ambulance swung open, then closed again.

Inside, there was silence, except for the quiet sniffles. The medic in the back didn't speak, just watched, helpless.

Blood still soaked them both.

The image looked more like a funeral than a rescue.

Till sat on the cold hospital bench, unmoving.

The fluorescent lights above buzzed faintly, sterile and bright, washing the world in a lifeless white. The blood on his clothes had begun to dry, stiff and itchy, but he didn't feel it. Not really. Not anymore. His fingers were still slightly curled, as though they were still cradling something fragile, something warm, something alive.

Someone called his name. Softly. Then again. Louder.

He blinked.

Mizi was the first to reach him. Her eyes swollen red, hair a mess, coat thrown over her pajamas. She dropped to her knees beside him and grabbed his hand with shaking fingers.

"Till—Till, are you okay? Talk to me—please—"

He flinched at the contact. Slowly turned to her, as if remembering she existed.

Then Sua arrived, seconds behind. She was usually calm, always the pillar—but today her lips trembled, and she looked seconds from collapsing.

She hovered for a moment before kneeling beside them both. Her hand went to Mizi's back, then to Till's shoulder. He didn't respond.

His mother came soon after, tears running down her face like rivers. When she saw him, blood-soaked, unmoving, still staring ahead like something inside him had cracked and evaporated, she gasped. She covered her mouth. Then she ran to him and gathered him into her arms.

That's when Mizi started crying.

That's when Sua broke too.

And together they held him, as if their warmth could undo what the world had done.

Till didn't cry.

He just sat there, soaked in dried blood, his lips slightly parted, his gaze distant—lost in some place no one else could reach.

Time passed. The clock above the ER door ticked on. They tried to talk to him. No response.

And then the doctor came.

A middle-aged man with tired eyes and a clipboard held close to his chest, like a shield. He glanced at the grieving group, and his expression shifted into something deeply apologetic. He looked like he'd done this a hundred times—but this time, it still hurt him.

"Are you the family… of Sir Ivan?" he asked softly.

No one spoke. But they nodded.

The doctor looked down at the sheet of paper in his hand, then exhaled like he didn't want to say it. Like maybe, if he stayed quiet, it wouldn't be real.

"I'm very sorry," he said gently. "He… he died on impact. There was nothing anyone could've done. It was… a suicide."

Silence.

The word hung in the air. Heavy. Ugly. Like a curse.

Mizi gasped, burying her face into Sua's shoulder.

Sua looked away, biting her lips until they bled.

Till?

He didn't move.

He didn't speak.

He didn't blink.

He just sat there, still held in his mother's arms, staring at the wall across from him like it might split open and reveal some kind of truth. Like maybe, just maybe, this was a mistake. A bad dream. An illusion.

Because Ivan wouldn't do that.

Ivan wouldn’t do that.

Not him.

Not the Ivan who smiled like springtime and laughed like thunder.

Not the Ivan who gave his all to be able to walk again.

Not the Ivan who kissed his temple beneath the moonlight like a promise made without words.

Not Ivan, his childhood friend.

Ivan wouldn’t do that.

He knew Ivan best.

Till opened his mouth.

Nothing came out.

He lifted his hand to touch his own cheek, as if checking to see if he was still there. If any of this was still real.

It was dry.

No tears.

He didn’t even realize when they stopped.

His mother wept into his hair. Mizi sobbed beside him. Sua held them all, even as her own tears finally slipped free.

But Till… just stood.

Somehow, he was standing now.

The doctor said something else. More condolences. More things that were supposed to be comforting. But they didn't reach him.

He didn't know why everyone was hugging him.

He didn't know why his chest felt so tight, but his eyes wouldn't cry.

He didn't know why he couldn't hear their voices clearly anymore, like he was under water, slowly sinking.

He didn't know why he couldn't move his legs.

He didn't know why… he couldn't feel anything at all.

After all, Ivan is not dead.

The room was quiet save for the rustle of coats, the sharp sniffles, the sound of people weeping in their fists. A soft chant echoed from a

small speaker in the corner. Low, heavy. Like mourning itself had a sound.

Everyone wore black.

Black coats. Black suits. Black shoes, black hair ties, black veils. Even the white chrysanthemums and lilies that filled the altar felt muted in the heavy silence, as though they too were grieving.

Some people were kneeling on the white floor mat near the casket, head bowed so low their foreheads touched the ground. Others stood motionless, holding incense sticks with trembling fingers. A few sobbed quietly into tissue, red-eyed, fragile, broken.

Till stood among them like a ghost.

His eyes were hollow, barely blinking, his face pale and expressionless under the fluorescent lights. He didn't look like he was mourning. He looked like he had died too, and no one had noticed yet.

Why is he here?

He couldn't remember walking into the funeral hall. Couldn't remember putting on the black suit. Couldn't remember the moment someone took Ivan's belongings out of his hands, or the ride over in a car with darkened windows.

Why is he standing?

He looked up slowly.

Ivan's picture was framed in white, sitting at the center of the altar. Smiling.

That same smile—the crooked one. The one with his snaggletooth showing. His dark eyes gentle. Warm. Beautiful.

Why is that picture there?

His breath caught. Something inside his chest tightened. He wanted to scream again. To fall apart. But all that remained inside him now was silence and snow.

Then the doors opened.

The cold air cut through the funeral hall like a blade, snowflakes caught in the wind dancing briefly into the room.

Two figures stepped in.

The man was tall. Towering. Built like an unyielding wall in an expensive, immaculately tailored coat. His hair slicked back, sharp cheekbones, and eyes like winter. Lifeless and cold.

Beside him stood a woman with striking features, elegant and statuesque, even taller than most Omegas. Her fur-lined coat brushed the floor as she walked.

Till knew them.

He had seen them before, in photos, in memory, in stories Ivan never wanted to tell.

Ivan’s parents.

He approached them, slowly at first, like someone walking into a dream that felt more like a nightmare.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

His voice was hollow, his throat raw from days of screaming.

Unsha didn’t respond. He walked past Till like he wasn’t even there and stopped in front of the coffin. He looked down at Ivan's body, now still, now silent, now painted and dressed and placed carefully in the white shroud.

There was no reverence in his gaze.

No sorrow.

Only scrutiny.

Disdain.

Like he was evaluating a business decision gone wrong.

The woman stood beside him and tilted her head. Her painted lips curled slightly as she inspected her dead son's face.

"He looks horrendous," she said. "They didn't even do the makeup right."

That was it.

That was the moment something snapped in Till.

It wasn't rage at first. Not quite. It was something deeper. Something primal. It was grief being desecrated. Love being spat on. Pain being mocked.

And it rose inside him like fire erupting through cracks in a frozen sea.

"**How *dare* you,**" Till hissed. His voice didn't sound like his own anymore. It was hoarse. Broken. Shaking. "How dare you come here after *everything Ivan went through!*"

He stormed forward, standing eye-to-eye with the towering man.

He should have been afraid.

But he wasn't.

"How dare you mock him like this—*how dare you.*"

Unsha finally looked at him, his cold gaze sharp.

"So," he said quietly, "you're the Beta he desperately clung to like a beggar."

"Shut up."

Till's hands were trembling. But he didn't lower his eyes.

"Say whatever the hell you want about *me*—I don't care. But *him*—he's your son.

The man's voice was steady. Emotionless.

"I have no son."

Till stopped breathing.

The man didn't flinch.

"The moment he refused to listen to me, he ceased to be. Look at him now. A *pathetic* corpse."

Till's vision went red.

All he could think of was killing this man. Tearing him apart.

Screaming until his throat bled. Making him feel even a fraction of what Ivan felt every day—every night.

A soft, syrupy voice cut in.

“Honey,” the woman said, placing a hand on her husband’s arm, “and boy, calm down. Everyone is looking at us. This is getting embarrassing.”

Embarrassing.

Embarrassing.

Till felt something twist in his gut.

He shoved Unsha with all his strength.

It was like pushing a statue. He didn’t even stumble. But the effort didn’t matter. It was the gesture that screamed.

“Get out.”

His voice echoed.

Heads turned.

People froze.

The air in the funeral hall grew heavier.

“GET THE HELL OUT.”

Security guards. Alpha bodyguards started moving toward Till, but the man raised a hand and stopped them.

Unsha's footsteps echoed hollowly as he walked away, his coat sweeping across the polished floor. The woman followed, her heels clicking, the sharp rhythm piercing through the silence like nails to the heart.

But just before she crossed the threshold of the funeral hall, she paused.

She glanced back, first at the coffin, then at Till.

Her eyes trailed over him slowly. The bloodless face. The trembling shoulders. The rawness in his posture, like a wounded dog snarling in grief. And then she smiled. Faintly. Almost with amusement.

Like none of this mattered. Like he didn’t matter.

“What a scene,” she murmured.

Her voice was silk dipped in venom. Light, casual, effortless.

As if Ivan’s death was theater.

As if Till’s pain was just noise.

As if this—*all of this*—was merely an inconvenience that she'd soon forget.

Till's hands clenched at his sides so tightly that his nails dug crescents into his skin. His lips were parted slightly, as though caught between a scream and silence.

The woman's heels clicked again as she left, and the cold air rushed in once more.

The doors closed behind them.

It had been a week.

Seven days since the wails had echoed in the funeral room. Seven days since the silence became louder than any scream Till could make. Seven days since Ivan was pronounced dead, zipped into a body bag, cradled in sorrow.

Now, the final part.

The ground was hard from the cold. The snow had turned to slush in some parts, but a space had been cleared—dug deep, wide. The kind of hole that doesn't get filled with anything but silence.

People had gathered again.

More black coats. More downcast eyes. Umbrellas shielding faces that were already streaked with tears. The air smelled of damp earth and flowers wilting in the cold. White lilies. Chrysanthemums. Roses wrapped in trembling fingers.

Mizi held Sua's hand, the two of them standing close, as if shielding each other from the reality that lay ahead. Luka stood beside Hyuna, his face pale and unreadable, his hands shoved into his coat, clenching. Io stood quietly, a tissue crumpled between her fingers, her lips trembling as she stared at the dark casket being lowered into the grave.

The ropes creaked.

Soil waited.

No words could cover the sound of that descent. The coffin seemed too small. Too final.

Some cried again. Others couldn’t find any more tears.

One by one, they stepped forward. Flowers were thrown in. Petals landed softly on the glossy black wood.

And then the soil began to fall.

Shovelful by shovelful. Soft thuds that hit like hammers to the chest.

Mizi broke down again, turning away as Sua held her tightly.

But not everyone mourned close.

At a distance, a luxurious black car sat parked beneath the leafless trees. The engine was off. No movement.

Beside it stood a woman.

She wore dark sunglasses despite the gray sky, her face unreadable beneath a veil of elegance. Her fur-lined coat, sleek and expensive, brushed the snow lightly as she stood perfectly still, watching from afar. Her gloved hands remained folded in front of her. She never approached.

She never shed a tear.

But she watched.

Until the coffin disappeared fully beneath the soil. Until there was no more Ivan to see.

And still… one person never came.

Till didn't attend.

Not that day.

Not when the grave opened.

Not when it closed.

He was somewhere else, silent.

Gone in a way that looked almost like death too.

It had been nearly a month.

Thirty days without Ivan. Thirty days of waking up and realizing that dream never ended, because it wasn't a dream.

Till was barely functioning.

He had quit the band. Music no longer made sense. The strings of his guitar, once full of melodies, now felt like steel wires digging into skin. His voice cracked the last time he tried to sing and hadn't returned since. The silence in his room was unbearable, but the noise was worse.

He still went to school, mechanically. His mother begged him not to drop out. So he went.

But anyone who looked at him could tell, he was only there in body.

His skin had gone pale, bruised beneath the eyes. The hollows beneath them had deepened, his eyes sunken and strange. Like sleep no longer visited him. Like he hadn't eaten a proper meal in days, maybe weeks. His classmates no longer tried to talk.

Whispers still followed him in the halls, about Ivan, about the Alpha,

about how perfect he was, and how strange it is that he jumped.

Everyone had cried.

Everyone had mourned.

But life went on.

The world spun again, slowly, like it always does. Projects resumed. Students returned to laughing. Some still bowed their heads when they passed Ivan's old locker. Some left sticky notes. Flowers. But they stopped coming after a while. The hallway grew quiet again. The space Ivan once filled began to feel like any other part of the building.

But Till…

Till didn't move on.

He remained… stuck.

Because it felt like cheating. Like betrayal. Like if he forgot for even a second, Ivan would truly disappear forever.

Time did not pass for him. It folded in. Ate itself.

He started skipping classes even when he showed up to school. He'd stare out the windows, watching the wind blow through leaves that had turned to ice. Once, a professor asked him a question and he

blinked, as if it had come from underwater. Someone dropped a textbook behind him and he flinched so hard his pen snapped in his hand.

He hated the cold. It reminded him of that day.

He hated the snow. It made everything feel like that morning again.

At home, he locked himself in his room. Curtains drawn. Lights off. Clothes strewn about. A mess. Everything was a mess.

Sometimes, he would sit beside his wall, blank-eyed, and suddenly feel his forehead throb. He had smashed it against the concrete again. And again. He didn't even notice when he bled, not until his mother screamed.

Till thought he finally knew Ivan. He thought he finally understood him. Thought he saw the signs.

Maybe it was because he wanted to see Ivan happy. Needed to believe Ivan had made it out of the darkness. Needed to believe that the way Ivan smiled at him lately—was real.

But now all he could see was the pain behind that smile. All he could hear were the words Ivan never said.

The guilt—the guilt gnawed at him like a starving beast.

If he had looked closer.

If he had listened better.

If he had pushed harder—hadn't let himself get so distracted, so selfish, so blind—

Maybe Ivan would still be here.

Maybe Till would still hear that stupid, annoying voice in the morning, complaining about how his eggs were too dry or how cold the bathroom tiles were.

But now there was nothing.

Some nights, the grief was quiet. A weight that made his body heavy and his breathing shallow.

Other nights, it exploded inside him.

Till would throw something, shatter it against the wall—then crumble beside the pieces, sobbing like he could cough his own heart out. Like if he could cry hard enough, the pain might drown.

He wanted to curl into darkness, to disappear into it. Sometimes he wished he could cut the feeling out.

He wanted to tear out his own heart just to stop the unbearable ache. Just rip it from his chest like roots. And If he could carve out, maybe he could breathe.

Take it. Take it. Just stop. Make it stop.

He didn’t want to feel anymore.

His mother had found him one night, curled under his desk, fists in his hair. His face buried in his arms. He didn’t speak. She tried to hold him. He didn’t respond. His body just trembled.

Sometimes she’d hear him cry and pretend she didn’t, just so he could have the dignity of grief in private. Sometimes she’d sit outside his door, crying quietly with him.

He didn’t mean to be loud, but grief was ugly, and pain had no etiquette.

The worst part wasn’t the pain.

It was the denial.

Till still, deep down, waited.

Sometimes, for just a second, he would walk past a corner or a familiar hallway and pause. He’ll be there, he thought. Ivan’s going to show up. With that smug look. Say something stupid. *Knock on my door. Annoy me again.*

But it never happened.

Some days, when it rained, he’d stare out the windows and forget

where he was.

His mind would blur, like the smudged ink of a failed sketch. Sometimes he thought it was all a dream—some long, cruel, stupid dream. Maybe Ivan was just hiding. Maybe he was just playing a sick joke. Any minute now he'll come back. He always came back. He always…

But the world didn't play along.

He saw Ivan's name on someone's lips and it felt like knives.

He saw his face in a photo, and it crushed him.

He heard someone mention the word *Alpha*, and he had to leave the room.

It was never fair.

Seeing someone you care about become a memory.

It was never fair.

Till avoided everyone.

He didn't reply to messages. Ignored calls. Walked past friends like they were strangers. If someone tried to grab his arm, he'd pull away and say, "I'm busy," even when he wasn't. He never looked them in

the eye.

He told his mother he wanted to move out. She begged him to wait until graduation. Said he didn't have to rush. Said he could stay, just a little longer.

But Till insisted.

"I just want to be alone."

And she let him go, even though it broke her heart.

He found a small apartment on the quiet side of town. A cold, empty place with white walls and no memories. That was the point. No sound. No presence. No shadows of anyone but himself.

No Ivan.

He stopped going out unless necessary. Grocery runs were quick. School was mechanical. People stared at the Till that walked through campus like a ghost. Some tried to talk. They stopped when they realized he wasn't listening.

Then… graduation came.

Caps, gowns, flowers—smiles.

The air was thick with joy. Everyone was beaming. Parents clapped,

cheered, cried. Cameras flashed. Students threw their arms around one another. Laughed. Screamed.

But not Till.

He stood at the edge of the crowd with his mother, a bouquet clutched loosely in his hand. He hadn't even looked at it. His diploma weighed nothing in his hands. His cap was crooked. He hadn't cared enough to fix it.

His mother stood beside him, proud but quiet, her eyes always flickering to him.

Because even now—on this day—he looked like he wasn't there.

Till didn't want to take pictures. Didn't want to celebrate. He just wanted to go home, crawl into his empty room, and disappear again.

He was about to turn away when a voice stopped him.

"Till!" Mizi.

He turned. She stood there with Sua, Luka, Hyuna, Isaac, Dewey. All dressed in their gowns. Smiling. Eyes hopeful. Mizi held her phone up, her voice soft. "Let's take a picture?"

He should've said no.

But something in him cracked. Something in him felt guilty.

So he nodded.

The group gathered in front of the school's big steps. Mizi stood beside him, naturally. So did Dewey. Sua looped her arm around Mizi. Hyuna leaned on Luka's shoulder, laughing at something Isaac said. Their faces were lit with sunlight.

And Till…

Till took a small step to the side. A subtle thing. Barely noticeable, but it created a space between him and Mizi.

A space wide enough for someone else.

Wide enough for Ivan.

The camera clicked.

And in that perfect picture—

Everyone was smiling.

Except Till.

“Have you ever heard of that artist?” someone asked once over the buzz of a dim-lit bar.

The scent of whiskey hung in the air, lights flickering red and gold over worn-out tables. “The one who screams when he sings."

They were talking about ***T1LL***.

The man onstage with silver-streaked hair and eyeliner that smudged like shadows beneath tired eyes. The one who held his guitar like it was stitched to his bones. The one who never smiled when he sang, but made you dance and cry anyway.

Seven years.

In the blink of an eye.

Seven years since that night.

Since *he* died.

Since everything died.

Everyone had grown up. Luka was managing a company now. Mizi traveled a lot with Sua, they were engaged last anyone heard. Dewey and Isaac were surprisingly teachers. Hyuna lived abroad.

They all lived.

And Till… survived.

He wasn't famous in the way people dream when they're kids. But he was known. Locally. Online. His performances trended every now and then on indie forums. He played in small clubs, underground venues, rooftops when the city was quiet enough to listen.

He went by **T1LL**—his stage name. Not "Till," not anymore. That name still hurt to say.

There were nights he sang roughly smooth.

And there were nights he screamed.

Screamed so loud the mic cracked. So loud people stood still, drinks frozen midair. Because there was something guttural in his voice. Something that hurt. Something too real to be faked. Like his lungs remembered what it felt like to drown in grief.

People said he was honest. They didn't know how honest.

Before the stage, he had scrubbed floors. Waited tables. Cleaned up people's messes. No one knew the boy from back then. No one asked where he came from.

His lyrics were full of ghosts. Full of grief that never got to speak. Full of "if only"s and "come back"s and "I saw you in a dream again." He never said names. But his fans wondered. They pieced together bits of

him through every setlist, every cover, every piercing howl that slipped between chords.

He was also an anonymous artist.

Hidden behind a pen name. The style was distinct: all black ink, heavy shadows, haunting beauty. His muse always the same. A man with deep black eyes and a crooked snaggletooth. Sometimes smiling. Sometimes not. Often reaching toward nothing.

Sometimes… drawn laying in a hospital bed.

Sometimes… falling.

Those drawings were known in quiet online galleries. No signature, no identity. But people knew. Somehow, they knew.

He moved on.

He built a life from pain. Wrote music from it. Drew through it. Got an apartment with tall windows and blackout curtains. Got used to silences and late nights and microwaved dinners.

He even learned to laugh again. Sometimes.

But still… not really.

Because there were mornings he woke up gasping, thinking he heard

someone calling his name.

Because there were shirts folded in the back of his closet that never got worn but never got thrown away.

Because there was a saved voicemail on his phone. Seven years old. A voice laughing on the other line, saying something stupid. Something about coffee and a cat Till never adopted.

Because there were certain songs he couldn't cover.

Because even when he smiled at fans and bowed onstage and accepted compliments, there was always something missing in his eyes.

Because no matter how loud the crowd got—

He never stopped hearing the silence of one person gone.

Yes.

He moved on.

But not really.

Still… life goes on.

Hyuna's message came out of nowhere.

[Hyuna] : *Till, let's meet up. Everyone's coming. I'm flying home.*

We haven't done this in forever.

[Hyuna] : *Actually, seven years. You don't get to say no.*

Till stared at the message for a long time. He had already typed a refusal out of habit. *Sorry, busy. Got work. Tour next week.*

But before he could press send, another message came in.

[Hyuna] : *Don't run away again. Just this once, okay?*

That's what made him pause.

He deleted his excuse and left the message on "seen."

The restaurant was fancy. Too fancy. Till didn't even bother changing out of his black hoodie and frayed jeans. He looked underdressed next to the velvet chairs and wine glasses, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

Inside, the table was full. Everyone was already there.

Mizi and Sua sat close, fingers barely touching under the table—together and quiet, but glowing. Hyuna had her hair tied back, her coat draped elegantly on the seat. Isaac and Dewey were talking animatedly, some inside joke flying between them. And Luka…

Luka looked like he belonged there. White shirt, gold brooch, calm eyes. Regal, like always. As if he never aged, never lost himself the way Till had.

“Till, here!” Mizi called out, waving.

“You’re late,” Luka said without looking up, sipping from his glass.

“You’re just early,” Till replied as he sat, his voice flat but familiar.

“Just sit,” Hyuna said, almost fondly.

Till nodded. “Welcome home, by the way.”

“Thanks, it's great to be home.” Hyuna smiled.

They ate. Talked. Caught up.

Till said little. A short laugh here, a nod there. It was like watching a play where he knew the script but didn’t have the energy to perform. The others didn’t press him, maybe they were used to it.

Then, as the night lingered and laughter softened into slow conversation, Till’s voice cut through.

Low. Careful.

“Was it you then?”

Luka paused mid-bite, looking up slowly.

“…What?”

Till’s eyes didn’t waver. Calmness gone. Replaced by something brittle. Something sharp under the surface.

“You know what I’m talking about,” Till said. The table fell silent.

Luka set his fork down gently. “No,” he said, voice still even, “I don’t.”

“Stop,” Sua interjected quickly, eyes flicking between them. “We’re here to bond. Not fight like cats and dogs.”

But Till didn’t respond.

He stood, slow and quiet, pushing his chair back. No dramatic motion. Just something tired in his bones.

“Hey, man. ” Isaac said, frowning. “Don’t be so rude.”

But Till was already walking toward the door.

A long silence followed.

Then Luka wiped his mouth with a napkin, calm as ever.

“I’ll be right back.”

And he stood and followed.

The night air bit cold as Luka stepped outside.

Till was already ahead, walking fast, shoulders tight, head low, fists clenched like he was trying to hold himself together.

Luka’s footsteps echoed in crisp, even rhythm on the pavement behind him.

“What happened back there?” Luka asked, his voice level—too level. “What was that about, Till?”

Till didn’t answer. He just kept moving. His jaw was set like stone.

Luka tried again, voice still calm, but edged now with something harder. “Till. Talk to me. What are you accusing me of?”

The silence stretched thin between them—sharp and fragile.

And then Luka said it. Quiet. Unflinching.

"…This is about Ivan, isn't it?"

Till froze.

He turned around slowly. His eyes were rimmed red—not just from rage, but from exhaustion. Grief. Sleepless nights stretched too long.

"So it was you," he said, voice rough.

Luka stopped in his tracks. Still as ice. Unbothered. Unreadable.

His reply came smooth, even.

"And if it was?"

There was something in his tone—detached, silken, sharp as a needle sliding beneath the skin.

The words hit like a slap.

Till's expression cracked, and then he moved—sudden and violent—shoving Luka back, slamming him hard against the wall. The impact rang out across the quiet night.

“You—You’re the reason he’s gone!” Till’s voice broke on the word gone. “You were the last one to talk to him, what did you say?! Did you tell him to do it?!”

His grip on Luka’s collar was trembling with fury, knuckles white.

Luka’s face remained still, gaze steady. He didn’t push back. Didn’t blink.

He said nothing.

“Answer me!” Till roared, his voice raw and hoarse.

Still, Luka was silent. The way he stared—not passive, but piercing, it made the moment heavier.

From across the lot, someone yelled, “Till! Stop—what the hell are you doing?!”

Dewey. Running. But neither of them turned.

Just as Till’s arm drew back, ready to swing—

A figure lunged from the group to stop him.

But Luka, quiet and poised, raised one hand. A small, deliberate gesture.

Let him.

It startled everyone. Even Till.

Just for a second.

Then Till's fist connected. Hard. Luka's head snapped sideways, hair falling over his cheek. His lip split. Blood began to well.

But he didn't fall.

He turned his face back slowly. Straightened. Not defiant—just composed. Still watching Till, his expression unreadable.

Till pulled back again—furious, grief-stricken, unraveling.

But Isaac and Dewey reached him first, grabbing his arms from behind.

"Hey! That's enough!" Isaac shouted. "You've gone too far!"

"Let me go!" Till thrashed against them, trying to break free.

"Till, stop it!" Dewey barked, struggling to hold him back. "Stop—!"

Luka stood in silence, dabbing the blood from his mouth with a folded handkerchief he pulled from his coat. There was no heat in his eyes. No pride, no spite. Just that same, devastating calm.

A kind of quiet mourning that didn't belong to anyone else.

"This isn't the way," Luka said softly. "You're angry, I understand. But grief doesn't give you permission to lose yourself."

Till stopped fighting, but he was shaking. Hard.

His chest heaved as if every breath was trying to hold something in. His hands hung limp. His eyes wide and lost.

"Ivan is dead…" he whispered, voice breaking on the name like it cut his throat to say it.

"**And?**"

Till gave a bitter laugh, hollow and sharp. "What exactly are you trying to say, Luka?"

Luka met his gaze without flinching.

"You're the one who killed him." Till's voice cracked. His fury spilled out in a violent thrash against Isaac and Dewey's hold.

"Luka wouldn't—he wouldn't do something like that," Dewey said sharply, trying to keep control, but his voice wavered. "You're not

thinking straight, Till."

"I saw him," Till hissed, teeth bared. "Don't fucking lie to me. It was you. You're the only blonde Ivan ever trusted."

He fought harder, boots scraping against the pavement as he tried to break free. "Let me go. Let me fucking go!"

"Calm down!—" Isaac grunted, digging his heels in. "You're losing it!"

Footsteps echoed—hurried, anxious.

Hyuna, Mizi, Sua.

Hyuna's eyes widened the moment she took in the scene: Luka's bloodied lip, his disheveled collar, bruises forming along his jaw.

"What the hell happened?!" she gasped, rushing forward.

Luka barely looked up. He calmly adjusted his coat sleeve, smoothing out the wrinkle like nothing had happened. "It's fine."

"Till, please—" Mizi stepped in, voice gentle but urgent. "You need to stop. You're not thinking clearly."

"Don't tell me to calm down!" Till snapped. "He's a fucking murderer. I know it. I've known there was something off about him from the start. And now he's standing here like he didn't do a damn thing?"

“Now, how could all of you expect me to calm down?!”

“Till,” Hyuna tried to reason, her voice tight. “You can’t just accuse someone without—”

“He said it!” Till cried, eyes wild. “He admitted it—maybe not outright, but he didn’t deny it either. You were all there! And now you’re going to act like I’m the crazy one?”

“Because you are—” Hyuna stopped herself. Swallowed hard. “Look. Luka was with me that night. The whole time. He never left.”

His voice dropped into something lower, more dangerous.

“You’re covering for him.”

“No, I’m not. I wouldn’t lie about this.”

“You’re lying,” Till hissed. “You’re all lying. You never *actually* fucking cared."

His voice broke, cracking open into something ugly and shaking and unbearable.

“You all just moved on like it was nothing. Like he didn’t matter! You —you—”

SLAP.

A clean, piercing sound.

Till's head jerked to the side.

Mizi stood in front of him, hand still raised from the slap. Her chest heaved with the force of what she'd done.

Tears glistened in her eyes—but they didn't fall.

"You think you're the only one who lost him?" she said, her voice quiet, but seething. "You think you're the only one grieving?"

Till stared at her, stunned.

"Ivan was our friend too. Mine. Sua's. Everyone's." Her voice cracked. "But you—you shut us out. You didn't let anyone in. And now you come back, all fire and fists, looking for someone to blame?"

She took a step forward.

"You don't get to scream at us like we're strangers to him. You don't get to act like you were the only one who loved him. We've been grieving too, Till—in silence, because you were too wrapped up in your own rage to see it. Please, listen to.. us."

Till's breath faltered. The edges of his anger began to blur, turning

into something far more fragile.

Dewey and Isaac’s hands loosened just slightly.

That was all it took.

Till wrenched free, stumbling back, as if the pavement had shifted beneath him. He didn’t speak.

He just turned—shoulders hunched, breaths uneven—and walked away.

The cold air swallowed him as he disappeared into the night.

“Till—!” Hyuna shouted after him, her voice cracking. “We're not done yet!”

But he didn’t stop.

Luka stood silent, still dabbing the drying blood from his mouth with a handkerchief.

No anger. No victory. Just a quiet, crushing stillness.

He finally spoke, voice low and even.

“Let him.”

The night dragged like a rusted blade, scraping against the corners of Till’s soul.

He writhed in his sheets, breath shallow, a cold sheen of sweat clinging to his skin. The blanket coiled around his legs like a noose. But he wasn’t awake.

Not yet.

He was dreaming.

Again.

The air was dense. No light, no warmth. No sound but the static hush of emptiness pressing against his skull.

Then came the footsteps.

Measured. Slow. Echoing from nowhere, yet everywhere.

Till found himself standing in the center of a concrete expanse. Bleached grey. Featureless. Vast. A room with no ceiling, no walls, no escape.

There—

Ivan.

Seated.

A lone, rusted chair beneath him like a throne.

He was dressed in the same clothes from that day. The day everything ended.

But his posture was different now. Effortless. Detached. One leg draped over the other. His fingers steepled beneath his chin as he stared down at Till from his makeshift pedestal.

Like a man observing an insect.

His snaggletooth peeked slightly from behind his lips as he smiled.

But there was no warmth in it.

Only cruelty.

“…Still clinging to breath,” Ivan murmured at last, voice rich and low, carrying the weight of something ancient. “Disappointing.”

The man stared at him like he was a stranger.

"...Ivan?" Till asked, voice a whisper of his own fear..

Ivan blinked slowly, like hearing a language he no longer spoke.

“You should’ve ended your life,” he said flatly. “That would’ve been the right thing.”

Till’s stomach dropped. “What…?”

“You should’ve come with me,” Ivan continued, voice smooth as frostbite. “But you stayed. You ran.”

“I didn’t—”

“You did,” Ivan cut in, rising from the chair with deliberate grace. “You think I didn’t see? How fast you buried me? How quickly you cleaned the blood from your hands?”

“I didn’t bury you,” Till whispered, voice shaking. “I never let you go —”

Ivan laughed.

It was low and humorless. A cracked, hollow sound that seemed to rot the space around them.

“Don’t insult me,” he said. “You think you’re better because you endured? Because you painted over your guilt and called it healing?” He stepped closer. “You didn’t survive, Till. You abandoned. That’s different.”

“No, I—I tried to live—”

“You tried to forget.”

“I didn’t—”

“You did,” Ivan hissed, and now he was circling Till like smoke, eyes too wide. Too black. “You played the victim. You made me a memory. Something tragic and soft. Something you could carry without letting it poison your hands.”

Till shook his head. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Lies,” Ivan spat. “You let me die. You watched me die. You should’ve come with me. You should’ve followed.”

Till took a step back.

Ivan smiled wider. His voice dropped, sinister and coaxing. “But it’s not too late.”

Then—his hands were on Till’s throat.

Not sudden.

Not violent.

Just… inevitable.

Till didn’t fight.

He just stood there, trembling, breath trapped in his lungs like a

scream that never escaped.

Ivan's grip tightened—calm and steady. Not rage. Not revenge. Just control.

Dream or not, it hurt.

And Till… let it.

"Why do you get to live?" Ivan asked, voice brushing his ear like rot. "Why do you get to stay in this world while I burn?"

Then—

A voice.

Soft. Familiar. Weak.

"Till."

Till blinked.

There—kneeling beside him—was another Ivan.

The real one.

Tired. Hollow-eyed. Quiet. Human.

Not the judge. Not the god.

Just the boy he once knew.

“Till,” he said again, barely above a whisper. “Wake up.”

But Till didn’t move.

Couldn’t.

He kept staring at the cruel Ivan, whose grip remained. Whose expression was now almost… bored.

“You should’ve ended it,” he murmured again. “You should’ve joined me. But you stayed behind, didn’t you? You kept breathing. You made your peace.”

His lip curled.

“Tell me, Till. Do you really think that makes you strong?”

“…What should I do?” Till choked out, voice thin. “Just… tell me. What else should I do?”

Ivan tilted his head. For a moment, he looked amused.

Then—

He vanished.

Like smoke dissolving into a colder silence.

The real Ivan remained.

He stood now, slowly. No judgment in his eyes. No accusations.

He walked closer, the sound of his steps almost tender. He reached out, barely grazing Till's cheek with the back of his hand.

His fingers were warm.

And he smiled.

It wasn't pity.

It wasn't even comfort.

But is was genuine.

The way he only ever smiled at Till.

"Follow your heart."

The air inside Ivan's old apartment was stale, heavy with time. It felt untouched, like the world had moved on without disturbing this space. Spiderwebs claimed the corners, dust clung to every surface, but the layout. The colors, the faint scent, remained unchanged.

It was as if the place had been waiting, silently preserving what was left of him.

Till stepped carefully, each creak of the wooden floorboards making him wince. His stomach twisted with every familiar detail, the jacket

on the back of a chair, the crooked photo on the wall, the old guitar case tucked behind the couch.

His throat burned. He didn't know why he came. Only that some part of him had to.

He reached the bedroom. The door was slightly ajar, revealing the shadows inside. Till stood at the threshold, unsure if he could breathe through the weight pressing on his chest.

The bed was still unmade, the same sheets from all those years ago. He turned to leave, his vision blurring until something caught his eye.

A small box. Sitting neatly on Ivan's desk.

Unlike everything else, there was no dust on it.

Like it had been placed there not years ago—but just yesterday.

Like it had waited. Just for him.

Till reached for the small box with trembling fingers. It was lighter than he expected.

He lifted the lid—empty. But as he stared inside, something stirred in the back of his mind. A whisper that he couldn't tell if it came from within or somewhere beyond.

The mysteries of Ivan's death. Of what he missed. Of what he failed to

understand.

Without knowing what compelled him, Till took the box to the police.

The moment he handed it over, it felt like some weight shifted—but not lifted. The investigation was reopened. But answers don't come fast. They never do.

Till continued his performances—face lit by the stage lights, but eyes hollow. He sang harder than ever, each note jagged, like he was trying to scream through the music.

His voice cracked more now, and fans noticed. The fire was still there, but he looked like he was burning out from the inside.

He ignored messages. Again.

All left unread.

Then another text came through. From Hyuna. This time, she didn't ask to meet.

[Hyuna] : *I know you won't show up again, so I'll just say it here. Luka and I are engaged.*

A beat later, another message:

[Hyuna] : *Luka said, 'apology accepted.*'

Till stared at the screen.

His fingers hovered for a while.

Then he typed:

[Till] : *Congrats.*

The roar of the crowd faded behind Till as he stepped off the stage, sweat clinging to his skin like a second layer. The cheers still echoed in the back of his mind, but they felt far away, muted by something else.

His phone buzzed.

Unknown Caller.

He almost didn't answer.

But something told him to.

"Hello, is this Till?"

A voice firm, low, from the station. "We have intel regarding the case you submitted. We need you to come in. Now."

Till didn't ask questions. He grabbed his coat, still half-drenched in

stage sweat, and left everything behind.

The police station smelled like paper, burnt coffee, and time. One of the officers led him into a room, then spread several images across the table—surveillance shots, photos of a dim-lit lab, mugshots.

“This is where the pills were being made,” the officer said.

“The same type found in Ivan’s toxicology report. We tracked the source—a long trail, but we’ve confirmed several of the people involved.”

Till’s eyes scanned the photos. Men with tattoos. A few in lab coats. Blurred shots from security footage. Needles. Bottles. Nothing clean.

Nothing familiar.

And then he said it: “He’s not here.”

“Who?” the officer asked.

“The blonde guy. He was there when Ivan—” Till paused, jaw clenched. “He was there. I saw him. I need you to find him.”

The officer nodded slowly, pushing a notepad forward. “Anything else you can remember? Anything specific?”

Till closed his eyes, gripping the edge of the table.

The case was alive again.
And so was the truth—just beneath the surface.

He sat beside the officer, staring at the grainy CCTV footage playing on loop.

“Do you remember what he was wearing?” the officer asked.

Till shook his head. “No.. Just his hair. Blonde."

They rewound the footage five times. Each time, Till leaned in, breath held.

Then—on the sixth pass—there he was. A figure in a dark hoodie, face obscured, shoulders hunched as if trying to disappear into the sidewalk. But under the hood… a flash of pale hair.

“There,” Till said, voice barely above a whisper. “That’s him.”

The officer paused the video, zoomed in, then noted the time and date. “We’ll keep digging. If he’s connected to this, we’ll find out.”

Each day after, he waited for calls from the police—each one bringing the smallest thread of hope.

But in the hours in between, he returned to something he hadn’t dared touch in seven years:

The song.

He reopened the worn, tear-stained notebook that hadn't left his drawer since that day. The unfinished melody that should have been Ivan's birthday gift—the song they were supposed to sing together, on Valentine's.

He titled it '***Cure.***'

With trembling fingers, line by line, he began to write again.

After each concert, the cheers always echoed loud—but lately, so did the questions.

Backstage, interviewers slipped in lighthearted jabs, one of the hosts grinned at him.

"You seem different these days, T1LL. Fans are wondering… did you finally find someone special?"

Till just leaned back in his seat, pulling a bottle of water to his lips before replying with a lazy shrug.

"Maybe I just slept better."

They all laughed. The host tried to press further, but Till gave that same half-lidded smile that meant the conversation was over.

To his fans, he wasn't rude. He just wasn't reachable—a little distant, a little untouchable. That was part of the mystique. He didn't flirt or charm, not really, but even the smallest glance, the softest chuckle, sent waves through his fandom.

Online, though, it was a different storm.

They screamed over every post, dissected every expression. On fan forums and comment sections, they debated endlessly.

#T1LLGlowUp trended for weeks.

"**Did he finally get a girlfriend?"**

"T1LL will betray us?

"No way. He's totally seeing someone."

"I DON'T CARE! HE'S MINE!!"

And even on his anonymous art page, where fans once scrolled through monochrome portraits and bleeding lines, they now saw vivid colors, oceans, sky, bruised violets and soft golds. Pieces that made your chest ache with something hopeful.

In the comments, people flooded him with the same question:

"Who changed you?"

"You seem like you're dreaming again."

"His art is full of color lately. Did you see that last piece?"

"Is this about someone?"

Till scrolled through them all in silence, then clicked the phone off.

Till never answered.

Not the interviews. Not the comments. Not the speculations.

He just kept writing. Singing. Painting.

Even behind anonymity, his art was alive in ways it hadn't been for years.

Even if they didn't know the name Ivan, they felt him in every lyric.

Still, the question buzzed everywhere—

"What changed him?"

Till ignored it.

Because some truths didn't belong to the stage.

And some names were still too sacred to speak.

The investigation pressed forward like a slow burn.

Every few days, Till's phone would light up with a message from the police. A short update. A name. A location. A new lead. The blonde man—*still unidentified*—remained a shadow slipping through cracks, always one step ahead. But his presence was no longer a rumor. He was real. And now, the law had teeth.

"This man is a ghost," one officer admitted over the phone. “But we’ll corner him. We’re close.”

And they were. In chasing the faceless blonde, the investigation had peeled open something far bigger:

An underground network of unauthorized drug manufacturers. Hidden labs were raided. False medical trials exposed. Pills made to alter biology illegally, force heats, suppress second genders, or break the body's natural code—were pulled off shelves. Arrests mounted.

It was chaos.

But it was progress.

Till didn’t say much, but he listened to every word. Sometimes with hands clenched so tightly around his phone that his knuckles turned white.

Every name caught. Every lab shut down. Every masked seller exposed. It felt like vengeance.

But it also felt… hollow.

Because it wouldn’t bring Ivan back.

Still, Till showed up at every debrief he was allowed to. Quiet. Sharp-eyed. Listening like his soul depended on it. And maybe it did.

The world was no longer pretending Ivan's death was clean or simple. It was messy. It was covered. It was deliberate.

And now—*finally*—they were pulling it into the light.

The call came right after dusk, just as Till was packing up his gear from rehearsal.

"I want you to be my best man," Luka said without hesitation, his voice calm and composed over the line.

Till almost dropped his phone.

"What?" His response was flat, confused, tired.

"My wedding," Luka clarified, as if it should've been obvious. "You may not be fond of me, but I trust you. And I… owe you something. You should help me choose my suit."

There was a pause. Till rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I don't know anything about suits."

"That's precisely why I want you there," Luka answered with a quiet amusement. "Your eye for art has always been irritatingly precise. It would be a waste not to use it."

Till scoffed under his breath, ready to decline. But guilt.. sharp and unrelenting, gnawed at his throat. He remembered the punch. The look in Luka's eyes when he told others not to interfere. That infuriating calmness, even with blood on his lip.

"…Fine," Till muttered. "But I'm not picking the color."

They met three days later in front of a luxury tailor—where the suits looked like they belonged to kings, not musicians and reserved nobles.

Till wore a black mask, hoodie up, his frame hidden. Popularity had grown like wildfire again, and the press had grown sharper claws. He kept his head low as Luka greeted him with a brief nod.

"Thankfully," Luka remarked, eyes scanning Till's face for a beat too long, "my face remained unmarred. I was worried Hyuna would call off the wedding if I appeared bruised in our photos."

"Sorry for that," Till muttered, not quite meaning it.

Luka waved it off with a flick of his gloved hand. "Tension leads to clarity. Perhaps it was needed."

Inside the shop, they were shown into a private lounge, velvet seats and mirrors stretching wall to wall. Luka began perusing fabrics with the eye of someone who understood taste, but kept it modest—subdued greys, refined whites, nothing flamboyant.

"Hyuna is with the ladies," Luka said, as he ran his fingers over a pale cream fabric. "Fitting her gown, adjusting hems. Apparently, details are sacred to them."

Till said nothing. He wasn't good at small talk. And Luka—Luka always sounded like he was writing poetry with every word.

Eventually, Luka turned to him with a strange softness. "You've been quiet."

Till stared at a rack of navy suits. "I've been working."

"And waiting?" Luka asked, eyes not leaving him.

There was a beat. Then Till sighed. "The case. It's going to break open soon. Any day now. The corpse—what led to it—it'll come out."

Luka took a long breath, then nodded, unshaken.

"I assumed as much. The news has been… fervent," he said, slipping his arms into a fitted jacket as the tailor adjusted the cuffs. "Illegal labs. Synthetic biology. A bloodied trail." He met Till's gaze in the mirror. "I suspected the moment I saw Ivan that last time… something was wrong. I simply didn't know the depth."

Till's fists clenched. "You're calm."

"I must be." Luka adjusted a pearl cufflink. "Hyuna deserves no less. And if the truth is approaching, I would rather face it with clarity than panic. My grief won't aid the investigation."

Till stayed quiet, something flickering in his eyes.

Luka studied him again, tone lowering.

“If you believe I played a hand in his death, I suggest you say it now, while we are alone.”

Till looked at him.

“I don’t know what I believe anymore,” he said. “But when I do… I won’t keep it to myself.”

Luka gave a small, respectful nod.

“Then may the truth find us both before the altar does.”

For once, Till didn't scoff.

They visited shop after shop, some too lavish, others too dull. Till was growing restless—tailors were beginning to recognize him despite the mask, whispering behind fitting curtains, smartphones subtly raised.

Luka, meanwhile, walked like nothing could touch him, poised and regal, eyes never lowering to the chatter that clung to them like shadows.

Alphas and omegas alike stared. Some openly ogled Luka, whispering among themselves even when it was clear—*obvious*—that he was to be

married. But Luka paid no mind. Not even the flattery seemed to sway him.

“Does this happen all the time?” Till murmured, eyeing the latest group of giggling bystanders.

Luka smiled faintly, eyes scanning fabric bolts with a fingertip. “Like dust in the air. I no longer bother to inhale it.”

Till rolled his eyes but didn’t argue.

It was in the fifth store. A quiet boutique, dim and intimate, where Till suddenly stopped walking. His eyes locked on a suit displayed on a mannequin by the corner.

The fabric was a muted ivory, almost silver under the warm lights, tailored with an elegant cut that whispered quiet power. Subtle embroidery danced along the edges like music. It wasn’t flashy. It wasn’t loud.

It was perfect.

“That one,” Till said before he even realized it had left his mouth. “That’s the one.”

Luka followed his gaze. Then he nodded, slow, approving.

“You have a remarkable eye,” he said, and turned to the tailor. “We’ll take it. No alterations. I trust him.”

Till gave a shrug, masking the tiny flutter of satisfaction in his chest.

As Luka made arrangements with the staff, Till's phone buzzed again.

A call from the police.

He answered immediately, stepping aside. The voice on the other end was sharp, energized.

"We found something. A new lead"

Till didn't wait.

"I have to go," he said to Luka, already walking away.

Luka turned. "Of course. Be careful."

Till gave a short nod. "And… congratulations."

"Thank you," Luka said with a soft smile. "Truly."

As Till stepped outside, the crisp air biting his skin, he didn't know that behind the heavy boutique curtains, someone had lifted their phone. The camera shuttered in silence.

A photo capture. Both unaware.

But the internet wouldn't stay silent for long.

Till sat stiffly across from the lead investigator, fingers clenched around the edge of his chair. The officer laid out the theory carefully.

“We traced the pattern and timing of the transactions, the access points, and one name kept reappearing. We don’t have confirmation yet, but it seems the man you saw attended the same university as you and Ivan.”

Till’s breath hitched.

“Do you remember anyone who might fit?” the officer asked. “Someone who might’ve held a grudge or had access to substances like the one found in Ivan’s blood?”

Till’s thoughts spiraled. He shook his head slowly. “Ivan wasn’t the type to let people close. If anyone knew anything, it should’ve been me... but I didn’t know anything.”

The officer’s voice softened. “Then maybe think about what pushed him. What changed?”

That question—what lead Ivan to do it—struck Till harder than he expected. His jaw clenched. He didn’t answer.

The officer nodded solemnly. “We’ll keep digging."

Outside, the world spun a different narrative.

Somewhere between boutiques and breakrooms, the photo leaked. A soft-filtered image of Luka and Till in the wedding tailor, Till mid-step, Luka in the background, adjusting his cuffs like a groom in waiting.

The internet roared.

“T1LL getting married???”

“T1LL and the Mystery Groom—Fans React!”

“T1LL Breaks the Internet Again: Who is This Handsome Fiancé?”

“I KNEW IT. They look perfect.”

“Good for him. They deserve happiness!”

Some fans were screaming with joy. Some speculated wildly. Some said they looked perfect together. Others mourned their own imagined chances.

Till stared at the screen, blank for a second.

Then he opened his messages and quickly typed.

[Till:] Hyuna

Sorry about the photo. It wasn’t intentional. I’ll clear it up if you want. Hope it didn’t cause problems.

[Till] : Luka

I didn't expect that to blow up. Sorry. I'll tell them the truth if you want me to.

Luka responded moments later.

> No need. The internet is a fickle thing. Let them think what they will. It'll pass.

Though… I suppose I should be flattered.

Thank you again, Till. You were exactly what I needed.

Hyuna replied soon after too:

> It's fine, Till. Honestly, I expected worse from your fans.

Luka finds it amusing. I'm just glad you two didn't end up punching each other again.

Thank you for apologizing. It means a lot. <3

Till locked his phone, leaning back against the cold stone wall outside the station. He took a deep breath, trying to steady the weight growing in his chest.

There were still so many questions. So many cracks in the story of Ivan's death.

But at least now, he wasn't just drifting.

The yellow tape fluttered faintly in the wind as Till ducked beneath it. Ivan's apartment, once frozen in dust and silence, felt subtly different now.

The police must've cleaned it partially—cleared some of the cobwebs, shifted the furniture ever so slightly. But it still held Ivan's scent beneath the stale air. Like something trapped in time.

Till stood in the center of the living room, heart pacing to the rhythm of Ivan's unfinished melody still looping in his mind. The silence was almost reverent. He wasn't here just to remember this time.

He was here to feel something again. To finish '*Cure.*'

As he stepped out of the building, a chill ran down his back. Instinct made him stop. He looked across the street.

Someone was standing there.

A hooded figure, just barely in the shadows—still, deliberate, watching. Not the curious kind of stare. Not the passing glance of a fan.

This gaze was too focused. Too calm.

Till felt his breath hitch.

The figure didn't move, but somehow they locked eyes. He couldn't see the face—not clearly—but the sensation of being seen crawled into his spine.

Then slowly, like the closing of a curtain, the figure stepped backward into the alley and disappeared.

Till's instincts surged. He hurried down the steps, heart drumming as he shouted after the man.

"Hey!"

Nothing.

He rounded the corner. The street was empty.

He ran a little further—checked behind the dumpsters, glanced at each alley crack and corner.

Gone.

It was as if he had vanished into smoke.

Till's hands were already dialing.

"Detective? It's Till," he said, breath uneven. "He was here. The guy. Just now. He was watching Ivan's apartment."

There was silence on the other end, then the officer's voice turned sharp. "Don't move. We'll send a team right away."

Till hung up.

The cold air now felt heavier, laced with a warning.

The alley was filled with shouts, boots hitting concrete, radios crackling.

"Over here!" an officer called. "We've got movement."

Till trailed behind them, his breath uneven, a fist pressed to his mouth as he tried to steady the rising storm in his chest. Every second stretched like wire pulled too tight.

Officers cornered someone in the next alley, guns drawn. "Hands where we can see them!"

The man raised his hands.

No resistance.

No hesitation.

He even walked forward, slowly, as if he had rehearsed this moment.

"Get down!"

He complied, knees hitting the ground, palms flat.

One of the officers moved forward, checking for weapons. None.

Then another came to cuff him, and Till watched—struck with a strange, electric sense of unreality—as the man let them. As if… he wanted this. As if turning himself in was part of the plan.

“What the hell,” one officer muttered. “Didn’t even flinch.”

Till stood frozen, the streetlight finally casting a glow over the man’s face.

And in that moment—Till saw it clearly.

Him.

The blonde.

The one from the tapes. The one in Ivan’s dreams. The one Till has chased in fragments of memory and nightmares.

His body moved before his thoughts could.

“YOU—!”

He ran.

Ran past the officers, rage igniting behind his ribs like wildfire, burning through every locked scream he had swallowed for the last seven years.

“YOU—YOU SON OF A—!”

The man barely looked at him. He didn’t react, didn’t blink.

He didn’t even defend himself.

Till’s fingers nearly reached his collar, blood boiling with the instinct to strike, to claw, to destroy—

“Till! Stand down!”

“Don’t!”

“Get him—!

Arms wrapped around him. Two officers pulled Till back hard, wrestling him away.

“He’s still under investigation,” one barked. “Do not make any move. Do you hear me?!”

Till struggled, snarling. “You don’t understand—he’s the one—!”

“I SAID STAND DOWN!”

His body trembled. His fists clenched so tight his nails dug into his palms. But he stopped.

The blonde was being led away now, his expression still unreadable. Quiet. Like he was detached from it all. Like it didn't matter.

Till could only watch as the doors of the police car shut with a cold, final *click*.

The rage didn't leave him. It pulsed quietly beneath his skin, a steady, poisoned drum.

They sat him down in a room with sterile white walls and a single steel table under harsh lights. His name came easy.

Yoo Young Chul.

Beta. Twenty-nine.

He didn't ask for a lawyer. Didn't protest when they read his rights. He didn't even flinch when they showed him the documents, photos, and reports. He simply looked at each with blank eyes and nodded.

"Yes," he said.

"I did that."

"That's one of our labs."

"She handled distribution."

"They ran it through this facility first."

"No, Ivan didn't know everything. Just enough."

"Yes. I gave him the drugs."

The officers exchanged glances. The recorder ran non-stop. His answers came as if rehearsed—not robotic, but calm, unbothered, as if the guilt didn't belong to him.

He gave names. Faces. Locations. Bank accounts. Hidden labs. Suppliers. The entire spine of the illegal drug ring that had cost so many lives, ripped open and laid bare like an offering.

It was too easy.

"Why are you confessing?" one officer finally asked.

Yoo Young Chul gave a faint smile, one that didn't reach his eyes.

"Why not?"

They monitored him carefully after that. Still, not once did he resist.

When the first wave of shock passed, the department moved quickly. Raids. Arrests. Closures. The intel poured in like water through broken glass. All because one man baited himself.

When the primary report was drafted and the arrest records lined up, one officer turned to Till, seated outside the interrogation room behind the two-way glass. His fingers were clenched together, knuckles white, jaw tight.

“You can talk to him now,” the officer said. “We’ll monitor everything. Just don’t do anything rash. 5 minutes.”

The door unlocked with a heavy click.

Till stood up, slowly.

Yoo Young Chul sat like a statue, wrists bound in cuffs, back straight against the cold metal chair. For a man surrounded by officers, locked behind reinforced walls, and thoroughly exposed, he wore the calmness of a man attending a casual brunch.

But the moment the door opened and Till stepped in, something flickered in his eyes.

Not fear. Not guilt.

Amusement.

Like a child seeing a favorite toy return.

“Ah,” Yoo murmured. “You really came.”

Till didn’t say a word at first. He sat across the table, folding his arms tightly across his chest. His jaw twitched, his breath sharp.

“You gave him the drugs.”

Yoo leaned in, grinning. “Obviously.”

Till’s voice darkened. “You killed him.”

But Yoo tilted his head, his expression still unfazed. “No, I didn’t. I was only watching him.”

“Basically, you’re stalking him.”

“Well…” Yoo’s smile widened. “It was fun. At first. You know—fun watching the perfect Alpha break.”

Till’s fingers curled into fists.

Yoo kept talking, like he was describing a movie he enjoyed. “They all talked about him like he was something untouchable. The dominant Alpha. So composed. Sooo—soo admired. But deep down? He was a broken thing. Couldn’t even have what he wanted.”

He leaned back, shrugging casually. “So I simply helped the poor guy. That’s all.”

“Helped him?” Till spat.

“I gave him a chance,” Yoo whispered mockingly. “To be what he wanted. To be an Omegaaaaaa.”

The word dragged with venomous glee as he grinned mockingly, almost sing-song. His voice was childlike, cruel.

Till could feel his pulse pounding in his throat. Yoo was smiling again, lips peeling back like a rotten fruit.

“But… it looks like his body just couldn’t handle it. Too bad.” His eyes gleamed, voice sickly sweet. “But he lived, right?”

Till froze.

Slamming his hands on the metal table. “You told him to jump.”

Yoo blinked.

Then laughed.

That grotesque wheeze again—thin, shrill, like a broken music box grinding to play a happy tune.

“Whatt? No, no—I didn’t,” he said between wheezes. “I’m innocent about that. What, are you gonna blame me for everything? Maybe he just…”

Yoo looked him dead in the eyes. “Couldn’t take it anymore.”

Something twisted in Till’s chest.

He wanted to lunge. To scream. To rip the table from the floor and crush it into this bastard's face.

But Yoo wasn't done.

He leaned forward now, voice dropping to a conspiratorial hush.

"Seriously? You're this stupid?" His lips twisted. "You're probably thinking: '*Oh, who's the man Ivan wanted so desperately…*'"

Yoo's hand raised—forming a crude gesture with his fingers, shaping a circle, poking through with another.

His tongue lolled out, slow and disgusting, the implication crystal clear.

"Willing to get laid over?"

Till saw red.

He didn't even remember moving—only the shriek of the chair scraping back, the table rattling beneath his weight, and then—

His fist collided hard with Yoo's jaw.

"Don't say Ivan's name with your filthy mouth!" Till snarled, voice

hoarse and breaking from rage.

The impact sent Yoo's head snapping to the side. For a moment, time froze. Yoo's breath caught, eyes wide, not from fear, but from something else entirely. Then, as the sting settled, his twisted grin returned, wider and blood-stained.

The door slammed open.

"Stop—get off him!"

"Stand down!"

Till lunged again, wild with fury, but firm arms locked around his torso, dragging him back. His heart thundered, fists trembling, breath ragged like he had sprinted through a war.

Yoo slowly straightened, a line of blood trailing from his lip as he wiped it with the back of his hand—almost amused.

He whistled low and slow.

"Now I get Ivan's frustration," he spat, licking the blood. "You're *this* stupid."

Till thrashed violently, trying to break free.

"Say it again! Say that shit again!"

But Yoo only leaned back in his seat, eyes gleaming.

And then he laughed. Loud. Cruel. Contemptuous.

The kind of laugh that scraped your nerves raw.

“Temper, temper,” he sang, rocking slightly in his seat like a satisfied child who broke someone else's toy. “You’re just as pathetic as he was. Maybe even worse.”

The officers were already hauling Till toward the door, boots dragging across the floor as he struggled. His eyes—wild, glinting with rage and heartbreak never left Yoo.

And Yoo?

Yoo smiled.

He waved with bloody fingers…

and then blew a mocking kiss in Till’s direction.

Till drove like a man possessed.

The city blurred past his windows, lights and buildings melting into a streak of motion he didn’t really see. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel, the accelerator pressed dangerously low to the floor. Every red light felt like a taunt. Every second wasted felt like betrayal.

He got home and slammed the door behind him hard enough that it echoed.

Then he lost it.

His fist hit the wall. Once. Twice. Over and over.

“Damn it!”

The pain grounded him for only a second, before rage flooded him again. He grabbed the nearest thing—an empty glass—and threw it. It shattered against the far wall, fragments raining down like sharp rain.

He didn’t stop.

Chairs toppled. His books, sheet music, notebooks was torn and tossed. A canvas he hadn’t finished was ripped clean in half. His elbow knocked a lamp to the floor. Drawers were yanked open and slammed shut. The shelves shuddered as he pulled things down just to destroy them.

Every part of him was trembling. His chest felt like it would split in half from the force of what he was holding inside.

His breath was ragged, chest heaving, vision swimming with fury and shame. He wanted to kill him. He wanted to tear apart with his own hands. He wanted to go back in that room and finish it.

He wanted him to pay.

And then—

He stopped.

His foot bumped something on the floor.

Till looked down.

A single, crumpled page of sheet music lay beneath his boot, dusted with a trail of torn paper and shattered glass.

His eyes followed it, to the mess he made, to the ruined living room, to the broken lamp, the split-open drawers, the overturned keyboard case, the shredded music sheets tossed in the corner.

One of them was the song he had been writing.

[LIVE FEED – BROADCASTING WORLDWIDE] T1LL: "Unknown" Comeback Stage – Seoul Dome | 9:07 PM KST | Viewers: 4.2M+ and rising

The stage was glowing, but not in the way it used to.

Gone were the vibrant, blinding colors. Gone were the fire bursts, the flame towers that shot up with every beat drop. Instead, the light was cold. Focused. Dimmed in hues of bluish white that turned the world to ash.

The fans were screaming.

“T1LL! T1LL!”

Phones were up, livestreams active, hashtags trending before the first note had even dropped.

But something was wrong.

Even before the music began, everyone noticed it.

Till stood at the center of the stage. Not quite still—just… weighted. Like the gravity on him was thicker than theirs. He was dressed simply tonight, not his usual array of black mesh, multiple earrings, chain harnesses and painted nails. Just a loose black tee, delicate silver chains hanging softly from the shoulders like broken wing bones, tucked neatly into straight black pants. A muted silhouette. Almost gentle.

He held the mic close, fingerless gloves pressing hard against the metal. His teal eyes were under his bangs, just barely visible, his lips parted as the intro rang out.

Then came the first words.

"Allow me, to the tips of your fingers

Dissolve me in your gaze

I don’t want to let you go…”

It was delicate at first, the way he sang—as if he wasn’t trying to perform, just speak to someone. Someone out there. Or perhaps

someone no longer there.

The camera panned close to his face, and people at home held their breath.

Something in Till was fraying.

“Please, leave me scars

Please, hurt me so that…”

His voice cracked slightly on that line. Just a hint. It was subtle, easily mistaken for emotion in performance—but those who knew his voice, the real fans, knew. This wasn't a stage act.

And then came the chorus:

“Read my soul

Yes, my soul…”

There was a pause. A tiny one. A gap of hesitation where Till’s gaze flicked out into the sea of people. His head tilted slightly—not dramatically, not for effect—but like he was waiting. Looking. Hoping.

A sharp breath, almost imperceptible.

And then he continued, voice rising again.

“May they linger on your tongue

You can break me apart…”

The melody swelled with electric guitar, and the drums hit with their signature aggressive style. The fans screamed louder—but only for a moment. Because they were listening now. Really listening.

There was grief in every note.

Till’s body arched forward, holding the mic like a lifeline, fingers trembling slightly as he closed his eyes. You could see the veins in his throat as he pushed through the next verse, even as tears shimmered at the corners of his lashes.

“Notice my pain

And mend me right now…”

The second chorus was where everything fell apart.

“Sick of these nights to come

In your gaze where I’m seen…”

He faltered. His voice dropped off.

The music played on, confused without him. The band looked to each other, unsure whether to continue or stop. The audience was deathly quiet. Some gasped.

He stood there, blinking.

A slight tremble in his jaw.

His eyes scanned the crowd again—but saw nothing. Or perhaps, he saw someone. A ghost. A memory.

And then came the part that was never meant to be sung alone.

“To this everlasting melody

Face to face we dance…”

He lifted the mic to his mouth again. But he didn’t sing it. Not yet.

The silence was terrifying. Electric.

Every heart in the stadium was caught mid-beat.

He looked haunted, lips parted. Then his voice broke through, barely above a whisper, but amplified by the silence.

“Consume me…”

It was supposed to be a duet. Everyone could feel it.

“Yes… me…”

He didn’t scream it like the recorded version.

He just said it. Honestly. Brokenly.

And that was when some people began to cry.

Because they finally understood, this wasn’t just a performance. This was Till mourning someone who's dead. Mourning something that never got a chance to bloom. This was regret and yearning and desperation molded into music. And it wasn’t just heartbreak—no, it was guilt.

It was pain.

The song ended not with a bang, but with silence. A mic drop would’ve been too edgy. Too fake.

Instead, Till simply took a step back.

He stared at the crowd with empty eyes, the chain on his shirt catching the light like falling tears.

And walked off stage—no encore, no bows, no waves.

But before he disappeared behind the curtains—

The rain began.

Not real water, but a masterfully programmed illusion—holographic raindrops falling gently over the stage, reflecting the dim blue-white lights like shards of sorrow. It started slow, soft as mist. Then heavier. A downpour that seemed to bleed through the air.

It wasn't in the schedule. It wasn’t in the tech notes.

The fans realized it too late, this was something Till had planned himself. A quiet rain to echo the storm he couldn’t contain.

The stage glistened, puddles forming in the holographic projection like memories collecting in corners too long ignored. The lights dimmed further, and the world became grayscale.

And the crowd was silent.

Not out of confusion. Not because they didn’t understand. But because they did.

Some stood there stunned, mouths slightly open. Some pressed their palms to their mouths, shoulders trembling. Many cried. Some tried not to. And a few lowered their phones at last—unable to frame this grief behind a screen.

Till was gone. The last note still hung in the air like an aftertaste. But somehow… the music hadn’t left them.

They were still in pain.

You could feel it—this lingering ache crawling beneath the ribs. The song had carved open something raw in each of them, something they hadn't realized they were keeping locked up too.

But even through that ache—they still cheered.

It started with one voice. A small, shaken cheer.

Then more.

Not loud. Not wild.

But steady. Real.

Claps followed. Then chants. "T1LL! T1LL!"

They weren't celebrating.

They were thanking him.

For being brave enough to fall apart in front of them. For bleeding into the mic so they wouldn't have to bleed alone. For sharing the hurt they didn't have words for.

It would be the most painful concert they ever had.

And it would be remembered.

Not for the lights.

Not for the screams.

But for the rain that never touched their skin—

—and still managed to drown them.

The road stretched on endlessly before him. Black asphalt, speckled with gold and white light, rolled beneath the tires like a film reel, endless and quiet. The hum of the engine was the only sound. The radio was off. He didn't need it—his head was already too loud.

It had been two weeks since the concert.

Two weeks since the illusion of rain.

Two weeks since the last note of Cure floated into silence, into breathless reverence.

People called it a masterpiece.

The most painful song they'd ever heard.

"You changed something in me," one fan wrote online.

"It felt like I lost someone too," another said.

It went viral—international even. Cure climbed charts in countries he'd never even visited. Journalists reached out. Brands wanted collaborations. Someone suggested a memorial tribute album. But none of that mattered.

None of that mattered.

Till drove.

He hadn't slept properly in days. Nights were hazy and short, full of noise. And faces. And old voices.

He rubbed at his eyes. The road shimmered under the early evening sky. Gold bleeding into blue. The world looked too gentle for what he felt.

He had taken a break from everything—music, rehearsals, interviews.

He had gone home.

Io had grown older. That soft kind of age where her wrinkles were memories, not burdens. Her hair was white now, tied in a bun like always. But her eyes—those stayed the same. Sharp. Familiar. A little tired. But kind.

They didn't speak much when he entered her home. They didn't need to. She hugged him tightly. Tighter than she had in years.

And she had watched his performance—of course she had. "I saw you," she said, voice trembling.

He wanted to cry then, but he didn't.

Buried his face in her shoulder. He let his breath sink in.

After their quiet dinner, she went to the old drawer near the TV and pulled out a phone. It was cracked, held together with tape on the sides.

She handed it to him wordlessly.

It was Ivan's.

Till stared at it for a long time. It didn't feel real, holding it. It still had the faint weight of someone else's warmth. It still had that faded sticker on the case, the one Ivan refused to replace even when it peeled.

He looked up. "Why only now?"

His mother sat down, sighing. “I tried... years ago. But you—now you're willing to listen.”

The phone had been with her all this time—returned by the police after the suicide. She’d kept it. Waited. Maybe, like Ivan had waited too.

The battery was dead, but she had the charger.

It powered on slowly, screen flickering. The background was a blurry image of a skyline—familiar. Till swiped up, entered the password. Somehow, he knew it.

It opened.

Photos. Hundreds of them. Thousands, maybe.

Till. Laughing. Talking. Sleeping. Eating.

A blurry selfie of Ivan beside him, grinning with teeth.

Clips of songs. Old recordings.

A playlist labeled: "TILL♥.”

Till's name was everywhere.

He had opened the messages app.

There were texts. From him.

Till had stared at those messages for hours. Maybe even days.

He hadn't told the police yet.

Not all of it.

Something in him needed to process this alone first.

He hadn't even told anyone he found the phone.

Not even the officers. Not yet.

He would. But not now.

He blinked, dragged back to the present as a notification dinged on his phone beside the dash.

Another article.

T1LL's "Cure" becomes anthem for healing and grief.

"T1LL'S PERFORMANCE HAUNTS MILLIONS: THE SONG 'CURE' REACHES #1 IN 87 COUNTRIES."

#CureLive #T1llUncovered #TheRainThatFell

People were writing essays. Creating videos. Clips of his performance had gone viral-internationally. The illusion of rain, the ache of his voice, the way he had disappeared before the lights could blind him.

Someone called *it the most devastating concert of the decade.*

He didn't know how to feel.

That wasn't what he had wanted.

His fingers gripped the steering wheel tighter now, knuckles pale, the tendons in his hands strained like piano wires pulled too tight.

The hum of the engine had deepened into a growl. Tires kissed the asphalt harder than before, and the world outside smeared into ribbons of gold and oncoming dusk.

He didn’t even realize how fast he was going until the trees on the side of the road blurred like ghosts.

Till's foot was heavy on the gas. He wasn’t sure when he’d pressed down harder, but he didn’t stop.

The lines on the road stretched and warped beneath his tires. The

wind outside grew louder, racing past his windows like something chasing him—or maybe something he was trying to outrun.

But the thoughts always caught up.

The images.

The voices.

The way the officer had looked at him—calm, clinical—when he said the words that didn't feel real at the time.

“Yoo Young Chul is dead.”

Till had stared, silent. Still. He remembered the way the pen in the officer’s hand twitched, maybe a nervous tick or maybe the weight of handling news that should’ve felt like relief. But it didn’t.

“He slit his throat in his cell. Early morning. Guard found him during rounds.”

They had shown him the autopsy photo. For confirmation. For protocol.

He had seen it.

The bastard’s throat torn open like a broken promise. Arterial red sprayed across the sterile white of the cell wall. Eyes wide, unfocused. Skin grey. Mouth still half-open, frozen in a gasp or a smirk—Till couldn’t tell.

He was dead. Really dead.

Till’s stomach had turned when he saw it, but not for the reasons they expected. It wasn’t horror. It wasn’t grief. It wasn’t even satisfaction.

It was emptiness. An emptiness so vast it rang.

"Isn't this what you wanted?"
"He's gone. It's over now."

But it wasn’t over.

It never felt like it.

Because death wasn’t justice. Not really. Not when it came without explanation. Not when it came easily—when Till had spent years trying to survive what that man did to him.

All the questions still clawed at his insides. The silence that bastard left behind felt louder than any scream.

Till’s breath hitched as he blinked hard against the wind slashing across the half-open window. His eyes burned.

His heart slammed unevenly in his chest, the way it used to when he got stage fright before stepping onto the platform. But this wasn’t adrenaline. This was free fall.

The car jolted slightly as he swerved to avoid a truck in the opposite lane..

Beep-beep.

The horn blared behind him. He didn't look.

Didn't care.

His mind was too loud.

Too full.

The phone on the dash buzzed again. Another notification. This time, not an article. Not a headline.

A reminder.

> Tomorrow: Luka & Hyuna Wedding @ 2:00 PM | Blue Garden Hotel Ballroom A

Till stared at it, wide-eyed, numb.

Right.

The wedding.

It should've been a day to celebrate love. A new chapter.

He gripped the steering wheel tighter, teeth clenched so hard his jaw shook.

The speedometer climbed past 120 kph.

The road twisted slightly.

He didn't slow.

Beep-beep. BEEEEEEP.

A honk from the other lane—he'd drifted.

He blinked, jerking the wheel sharply back to the right. His tires screeched against the road, rubber burning into the pavement. His heart didn't even flinch. The adrenaline didn't rush in—it had been there for miles now.

The air rushed in through the window. Cold. Sharp. A slap to the face..

It made his eyes water.

Or maybe that was something else.

"Ivan," he whispered.

The name escaped like a secret, broken and small.

The ache grew sharper, crueler.

He had so many questions.

So many.

He wanted to hit something. Punch through the silence. Smash the grief into pieces.

But all he had was the road.

The wind.

The sound of his own heartbeat, heavy like war drums.

He didn't feel justice. He didn't feel peace.

Just this unbearable unfinishedness, like a song that ended mid-bridge, like a final note that never got to fade.

Yoo Young Chul’s death had stolen the answers. Left only questions.

Till leaned forward, breathing hard, trying to outrun everything.

The phone buzzed again, probably another alert, another person interpreting 'Cure' like a riddle, turning his grief into content.

He wanted to throw the phone out the window.

Instead, he let the wind take his voice.

“Ivan, where the hell are you?” he choked. “What do I do now?”

No one answered.

As the sound came first—a deep, thunderous crash, like the sky was splitting in two.

Too late.

HOOOONK! HOOOOOOONK!—

SCREEEEEEECHHHHHH—

CRASHHH—

The truck's tires screeched as it careened into his lane, the metal of the vehicle groaning with fury, and then the impact.

Time shattered with the glass.

Jagged shards exploded inward, a thousand glittering razors propelled by sheer force. Till's vision lit up with starbursts—no, glass—glinting like shattered galaxies, each piece cutting a new scream into his skin.

Blinding white pain bloomed behind them as shards pierced through soft tissue. One lodged deep into his left eye. He screamed—he thought he did—but the sound didn't make it past the explosion of agony in his skull.

His body slammed sideways, flung like a ragdoll against the doorframe. Bone crunched. His temple cracked against the metal. Glass embedded deeper as his cheeks ground against the fragments like a saw.

The seatbelt cut into his ribs with such force it felt like a blade, not fabric—breaking something beneath, something vital.

Another shard tore down his cheek, deep and hot. Blood gushed, thick and warm, mixing with the acrid taste of gasoline and the sharp sting of air forced into raw, open skin. He tried to blink, but it only drove the glass deeper, blinding him on one side.

His face was a canvas of agony, split and torn by jagged fragments. One caught in the corner of his mouth. Another under his brow.

He could feel the glass shifting when he moved—**digging deeper.**

He was choking on blood.

The car twisted in the air—flipping, falling, weightless and wild. Everything turned upside down. Over and over. Steel groaned.

Time bent, stretched into something cruel. Every heartbeat felt like a minute. His skin was flayed open in strips, his limbs contorted in impossible angles. Pain bloomed in waves, his shoulder torn from its socket, his leg bent the wrong way, his spine screaming with every rotation.

Blood painted the ceiling—no, the floor—*no, what was up and down anymore?*

And still—the glass in his eye.

It throbbed with every beat of his heart, blinding him, disorienting him. He wanted to scream again, but all he could do was bleed. The world spun in sickening spirals, but somewhere in that chaos—

His mind raced.

He could see it in slow motion, each moment drawn out like a painful eternity.

Is this it?

He felt weightless, then slammed hard into something else. The steering wheel. His neck cracked, but the pain barely registered. It was so loud, but in his mind, there was nothing but silence.

The car kept rolling, flipping in the air, like a falling leaf caught in a storm. His seatbelt dug into him, but the impact was so brutal that it barely mattered. His body was being torn apart, but his mind was still screaming.

Then, in the chaos, in the twisting metal, his thoughts cut through.

The wedding.

Luka and Hyuna's wedding. Tomorrow.

It felt so far away, as if the world had already swallowed it whole, like it didn't matter anymore.

“I can’t make it,” he whispered to no one. The words barely left his lips, as the world spun faster. The truth was—he never could make it.

The only thing still holding him together was the seatbelt, biting into his ribs like a vice. He couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t move.

And yet—

A hand slipped into his.

Warm.

“Ivan…” he whispered through blood.

Ivan was there. Beside him. Not fading. Not a vision. Not a dream.

He was there.

Holding Till’s hand like the world wasn’t collapsing. His fingers threaded through Till’s, gentle and steady, like they had all the time in the world. He was kneeling in the crushed metal, surrounded by glass and flame, untouched. Like the violence of the crash dared not touch him.

Till tried to turn to him, but his neck screamed. Pain exploded again through his skull, his vision dimming, red leaking from his nose and ears.

But Ivan stayed.

He was smiling, his eyes full of the tenderness that Till had never understood. Till blinked, and suddenly, it was like he could see every moment that had led up to this one.

The kiss.

That night at the bar, when Till had been drunk, and Ivan had kissed him back, so softly, so desperately. The way Ivan had always been there, those small, subtle gestures, the way his hands lingered, the way his eyes softened when they met Till's. Every moment had been for him. Every touch, every sigh, every glance. It had all been for him.

The realization hit like a wave.

It was me. All this time... it was me.

Till's chest shuddered, and for a moment, he laughed—softly, painfully. A single, broken laugh, as the ghost of Ivan, the smiling figure beside him, squeezed his hand. Ivan's expression was peaceful, his eyes kind. It felt like a dream, like something too perfect to hold onto.

"You're okay," Ivan said softly, thumb brushing over Till's mangled knuckles. "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

Till sobbed. He didn't mean to. It just came out—a raw, ugly sound that tore through his broken ribs.

“I can’t—I can’t feel my legs,” he choked.

“I know,” Ivan whispered. “Just keep holding on.”

The car gave another lurch—one final groan as the earth beneath it crumbled.

They were falling.

“I’m scared,” Till said, teeth chattering with cold and fear and pain.

Ivan’s hand tightened.

“It's okay, ” he whispered again, voice so calm it almost broke Till’s heart. “I’ve got you.”

The wind howled as the car descended. The sky opened wide above them, the world turned black below.

Blood ran down Till’s face, leaking into his mouth, his eyes. The pain was unbearable—but Ivan’s hand never let go. Not even as gravity took them.

“You didn’t leave me,” Till whispered, voice barely a breath.

“I never would.”

The metal screamed as it tore apart in midair. Till could feel the pieces peeling away—windows, doors, pieces of the hood. But Ivan remained, holding his hand like none of it mattered. Like Till wasn't dying.

"I'm sorry," Till gasped. "Because of me I—"

"You don't have to," Ivan said. "I'll do it again."

"I love you," Till breathed.

And Ivan's smile was the softest thing in the world.

The car flew off the cliff.

The wind rushed. The earth rose up. But Ivan was still there, cradling Till's ruined hand in both of his, resting his forehead against Till's bloodied temple, as if shielding him from what was to come.

The ground was only seconds away.

"I'm here," Ivan whispered, one last time.

For a moment, the world was suspended in nothingness.

Only the air, rushing past him. Till's heart, slow and steady, as if it

had never been broken.

His smile never left his lips.

Because Ivan never left.

Even when the car hit the earth, even as fire bloomed and bones shattered—

Till never let go.

And neither did Ivan.

They went down together, hand in hand.

Not even death could tear them apart.

Till..

Till.

Till!

“Till. Till. Till!!”

A voice was calling him.

Bright, familiar, full of mischief.

Till's eyes fluttered open, the corners still damp with tears. The world around him was calm, no broken glass, no flames, no weight crushing his chest. Just grass, sky, and sunshine.

He blinked.

His hands were small.

So were his legs.

He looked up and saw Ivan, standing in front of him with his signature bowl-cut hair, worry knitting his brows and his dark eyes wide.

"Why are you crying, Till?"

"I… I don't know," Till said quietly, reaching up to touch his face. The tears were real. "I don't remember."

Ivan tilted his head, then gave a soft smile. "Must've been a bad dream."

And just like that, the sadness in Till's chest began to melt.

"Well, anyway—look what I found!" Ivan exclaimed, suddenly holding up a shiny sticker—*Till's favorite limited-edition* one that he thought he'd lost forever.

Till's eyes widened. "You stole it!!"

"Nooo, I didn't!" Ivan giggled, his laugh bubbling out like music.

Till lunged at him, and they burst into a playful chase, round and round the grassy field, laughter echoing through the warm summer air. The wind tugged at their shirts, the sun painted golden streaks across their hair, and for a while, there was only joy.

They played, they tumbled, they grinned until their cheeks hurt.

The kind that lives in memories you never want to let go.

They collapsed on the ground, cheeks flushed, breathless with giggles. Ivan flopped next to him, their arms brushing.

"I'm glad you're here," Till said suddenly, not even sure why.

Ivan smiled in confusion. "I'm always here."

Then—

“Till, Dear!” his mother called from the distance, her voice soft and warm.

“It’s time to go home!”

Till stood up and turned to her, waving. “Coming, Mom!”

He ran toward her with light feet and a happy heart, wrapping his arms around her legs like he always used to. Her hand smoothed through his hair, gentle and familiar.

But before they could leave, something tugged at him.

He looked back..

Ivan was still standing where they had played, watching them with a quiet smile. His eyes were soft, almost shy, and for some reason, Till couldn’t bear the thought of leaving him behind.

Without thinking, he ran back—**faster**, freer than ever.

He grabbed Ivan’s hand, holding it tightly.

“Come with us.”

Ivan blinked, surprised. Then that snuggletooth grin broke across his

face, as bright as the sun.

He didn’t say anything.

He just smiled and ran.

Hand in hand, they raced back toward Io, toward home, toward warmth.

The sky was wide and endless above them.

And Till’s heart felt whole.

Fin.

Chapter End Notes

Immediately puts on armor, holds a shield, and braces myself for the impact

H-halloo?? How are we?? Does this count as a happy ending? I don’t know.. but I tried. Them without a memory is better for me. I kept wondering whether I should make it bittersweet or just go for a happy ending, so I didn’t go either way completely. I really hope it feels satisfying.

Luka was not the Unknown number. Yeyyy
Till confessed? Yet Ivan only smiled. Uhuu

Andddd of course, I will always embrace your anger, your frustration, and your sorrow. I’ll be forever thankful for any comments I receive. Ending this story actually made me cry harder than I expected. The chaos we went through together, the emotions you shared through comments, kudos, and support, I felt them all. ٩(ꗃ ◠ ꗃ๑)۶

During the final scene, I was thinking and listening to "Die with a Smile" by Lady Gaga and Bruno Mars. And because of "The Final Destination" perhaps??

In that moment, I thought, Can I make this perfect? So many plans changed while writing this. So much editing happened. But I managed. I hope I did justice to all the characters, and I hope all your questions were answered in this chapter.

I know this isn't the typical form of omegaverse. Especially in this chapter, since it's more from Till's POV. As a beta, he doesn't really sense or process pheromones the same way.

I love Ivann. His death ruined me too. But I want him to rest, even though, somehow, his ghost still won't.

I know I'm a little bit too brutal in some parts but.. ahaha.. *scratches head*

Anyways, I still have so much to say, but I'll save it for the next (and truly final) chapter, just me yapping, as always. One last yap to close this story properly.

I'd love to hear your thoughts.
Thank you so much for staying with meee, everyoneee!! ｡°(°¯◠¯°)°｡

Chapter 27: Author's Final Goodbye

Haaalloooo!! It’s meeee, Yserah! Another author’s final silly note.

So yesterday, I posted the final chapter of "For What I’m Not."

How are we feeling? Ahahah...

Actually, the first title I came up with was "Wrong Body." It was perfect. Short. Straight to the point. But that title already seemed to be known and respected in other spaces, wayy too overused—so I decided to change it. I still think "For What I’m Not" is a good title, though! In my humble opinion, at least hehe.

This was such a great opportunity for me to write and show off my deep, burning love for angst.

Back when I had a Facebook account, I used to make a lott of angst posts LOL, and I seriously loved reading the comments, how people cried or felt things from them.

But of course, as an angst creator, I or we are not are not heartless □□ □ . We just want to express my pain to you. That’s what I’ve always wanted.

When my Facebook account was still alive, people kept telling me:

"You should write a book!" or

"You should try writing fanfiction!"

But writing a book always felt so… big to me. Like, too big.

Then I realized—I’ve never written a fanfiction before. Not once in my life. I was used to reading and reading and reading fanfiction from

other people. So I thought, *why not give it a try?*

Finding inspiration was hard, though. I kept searching and searching —until I stumbled across an artist on Twitter.

At that time, I didn't know the TillxIvan dynamic. I was still new to it, still figuring it out. But their story gave me a spark.

And I thought, Maybe I can try. Maybe I can do this.

This is it.

The desperation of Alpha Ivan. He'll do anything just so Till—Till the Beta—would finally see him.

I actually posted the first four chapters on Facebook before posting it here. Hehe.

Of course, when I first started this, it was hard.

Writing Omegaverse? Not easy at all.

And I didn't want them to act like animals or like dogs in heat or with rabies and all that stuff. I don't really like that, personally.

So I created a different method.

They still act like real humans, despite their secondary gender. Because I think normal humans should still act like humans.

When I posted the first chapter here, it already hit 500 readers. 500!!

I was so happy that some of you really stopped and read my work. Thank youuuu cbeifksjshfhsjj.

But what I didn’t expect was that this fanfiction… would save me.

Whether you believe it or not—I didn’t realize how much this story would become my lifeline.

I’ve said before that I’ve been through conflicts in life. But I’ve also been the cause of some of them.

And then...

I tried to—

Sorry for being emotional, this is a sensitive topic. But I tried to kill myself. For the second time.

I drank every medicine and pill I could find in the drawer. I didn’t think. I just... drank. All of it. Swallowed every last one like they were answers. Like they could fix something in me.

But then—

I woke up the next morning.

Dizzy. Drenched in cold sweat. My stomach twisted, and I started vomiting. Over and over, until there was nothing left—until I felt like I was throwing up my own insides.

I shit and shit, and it was black. My vomit turned green. My throat burned. My vision blurred. I couldn't even cry. I just kept shaking and

choking and wondering—*is this the price of my foolishness?*

My body was shutting down. I was so dehydrated I couldn't even stand. My lungs hurt when I tried to breathe. My chest was tight, like someone had tied a rope around my ribs and pulled.

I didn't die.

But God, it felt like I did.

And yet—somehow—

I survived.

Why?

Why did I survive?

Was it punishment? Was it mercy? Or was it some kind of cruel joke?

I don't know.

And maybe, just maybe, there's a reason for that.

Or maybe not.

But for now... I'm still breathing.

I came back.

And I wrote.

I poured every ounce of that pain into Ivan's story. Everything I felt. Every ache.

That's what Ivan's suffering is made of.

Every kudos, every hit, every comment—it felt like an entire lifetime to me.

Every time I thought about giving up on life, I looked back and reminded myself:

You can't give up. You have to finish this story—for them.

But you know what also made me smile?

When I posted the story on TikTok and Twitter, and people actually recognized it.. WAAAAAAAHHHH

I was even more overjoyed when, in Chapter 24—when Ivan decided to end his life by jumping off that building—someone made fanart of that moment. LOOKKKK!!!!!!

@DumbTll on X

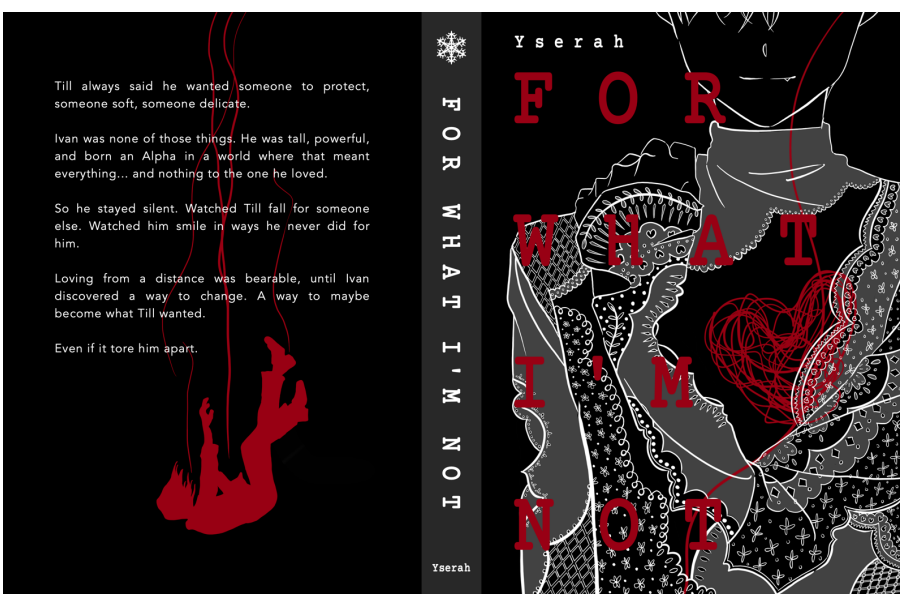
And now the scene from Chapter 16. KYAAAAAA, IVAN IS SO ADORABLE. My Lord—let me breathe. I am so grateful for this! LOOK AT THATTTT ˝´ᔓ□□

@cyberbitez on X

Ohhh GOD, another dearest artist strikes again! A scene from chapter 23 and it’s SO spot on I’mma combust. KYAAAAA!! Poor Tilly.. First thing I saw in the morning and my whole day was instantly MADE!!

@ryuisi_ on X

Someone made a cover for this fic.. Can you guys believe it? For mee?? For this fic?? It captures Ivan's inner turmoil and the way he jumps?? AAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!! I'm telling you I literally went.. I can't explain, EHEM, I can't function for 10 minutes!


Till always said he wanted someone to protect, someone soft, someone delicate.
Ivan was none of those things. He was tall, powerful, and born an Alpha in a world where that meant everything... and nothing to the one he loved.
So he stayed silent. Watched Till fall for someone else. Watched him smile in ways he never did for him.
Loving from a distance was bearable, until Ivan discovered a way to change. A way to maybe become what Till wanted.
Even if it tore him apart.
FOR WHAT I'M NOT
Yserah
Yserah
FOR WHAT I'M NOT

@Norabel_Grey on X

I felt so many things at once.

I didn't know how to describe it, but I just kept giggling. Like a little gremlin.

That's why I get really touched whenever someone shares their personal life, their thoughts, their experiences—because of this story. Some people have told me they've been through unrequited love too, or the pain of holding back confessions, or years of silent yearning. Some talk about regret... about losing someone they loved so much.

And whenever I read those comments—when someone says "sorry" for trauma dumping or oversharing—please, don't apologize. Really.

I feel happy. I feel special.

Because you chose to come to me.

You decided to open up and share something deep, something precious inside you.

That's not a burden, *it's an honor.*

I see you. I hear you.

Wait! Let me introduce you to the very first Alien Stage fanfiction I ever read. I didn't even check the tags, I just clicked on it because the synopsis pulled me in so strongly.

I had no idea it was a Till × Ivan dynamic until I was already reading it… and honestly, that surprise made it even more special.

I fell in love with every single bit of it. Completely.

I cried so hard because of that story. It broke me in the best way. And honestly, it's one of my inspirations. I've reread it three times already —and each time, it still hits just as hard.

That's why I really want you to read it too. Especially if you haven't yet!

Here!

Tips of Your Fingers, Ends of Your Feet

Help! … I can't stop feeling bad about the way I described everything —especially their deaths, each one, and most of all, the final scene with the car crash.

It's strange, but the idea actually came to me while I was watching "Final Destination". And in that moment, I thought, *This… this would be the perfect death for Till.*

And now I can't stop thinking about it.

I keep wondering if I went too far.

If choosing something so sudden and brutal, something inspired by that kind of movie, was too cruel for him—for them.

But at the time, it just clicked. It made sense in the story. It was supposed to feel sudden, unfair—just like the things they never got to say.

Still… a part of me feels guilty. Like I owe something back for writing it that way.

Anyway, enough about me.

I want to sincerely apologize for the mistakes I made, especially with the tags.

You were right. I should have tagged the story with **Major Character Death.**

Dont chu worry, I've already changed it.

And about the two ending tags—"**Angst with a Happy Ending**" and "**Bittersweet Ending**"—

I know it was confusing. But I promise, it was all planned.

The original idea was just going to be a short, simple angst story with a happy ending.

Like… 9k words. That's it.

The plan was that Ivan would die. Till would still friendzone him.

Till would move on, carrying Ivan in his heart—but not as a lover. As a friend.

That was the ending in my head.

He was going to become a famous singer. But one who no longer loved.

Just someone walking a path that Ivan would've wanted him to take.

Even though Ivan was dead… at least he got to set Till free.

But of course, the story changed.

The picture-sweep ending I had in mind became this:

They die in a car crash—off the cliff, colliding with the truck.

Till is in pain, suffering.

But he smiles—because Ivan is with him.

That was my emotional **Bittersweet** finale.

But then I added something more…

The **happy ending.**

Till wakes up as a child, with no memories of the tragedy.

It was a dream or maybe, a past life.

And that past life changes the course of everything.

This time, he will never, ever, ever leave Ivan again.

So yes.

It's a bittersweet ending.

But also a happy one.

That's why I was a little confused reading the comments.

Because to me, that ending I added was a happy one.

But I still feel your frustration. And I truly apologize for the confusion.

Ehemm... it might not be obvious, but my favorite character in Alien Stage is Till! 🩶🩶

Right now, I'm still wondering if he's really alive or not.

There were times I told myself,

"You have to accept it. Till is dead."

Because even if he is alive, what then?

He just keeps suffering.

Even when he finally accepted his end.

But then…

All these small hints—these little clues—

They make me wonder if maybe… I'm wrong.

Maybe he really is alive.

screams into the void

Anywayyyyy, about Yoo Young Chul. I created him so I wouldn't have to make Luka the villain in this story.

Because I love Luka.

I imagined him being friends with Till.

I wanted to give him another chance to bloom, even after all the misunderstandings.

I didn't want Luka to be nasty or disgusting or some twisted version of himself.

Because that's how he's always written in fanfics.

And I didn't want that here. *Not in my story. Heh.*

Let me explain something. *coughs*

The Pill—

The single pill that Ivan takes is more than just a drug.

It's a fragile symbol of his deepest desires and insecurities. To him, it holds the desperate hope that changing his body might make him lovable, might make him enough for Till. Though he knows the pill may never truly work, he clings to it like a silent prayer, choosing self-destruction over surrender.

It becomes a ritual of devotion, a quiet rebellion against the Alpha role forced upon him, and a heartbreaking attempt to become the kind of person he believes Till could love.

But the tragedy is that Ivan never needed to change at all, Till never asked him to. The pill, then, is not salvation—it's a lie born from Ivan's own belief that who he is will never be enough.

Hope. Illusion. Control. Devotion. Lie. Death.

Before I bid my goodbye, I want to leave you with one final questions. You may answer it however you want—honestly, quietly, even just in your heart.

What do you think was the biggest mistake of Ivan and Till in this entire story?

What was their fullest, most human mistake?

And perhaps... do you think they deserved the consequences of it all?

So far.. What was your favourite chapter or scene?

I know I've said this before, but now, more than ever—thank you. Truly.

I know this story broke your heart over and over, maybe even ruined your day, your night, your time. And for that, I'm sorry.

But thank you for staying with them.

Thank you for holding their pain.

Thank you for reading all the way through.

I hope, with all my heart, that this story stays with you even just a

little.

If inspiration ever finds me again, I'll see you in the next one.

Until then...

Goodbye.

And I love you.

All of you.

Love, Yserah.

Chapter 28: Author's Lil Announcement

Chapter Summary

Ehemm.. Please read.. •ᴖ•

Halloo, how are you? it's me again. Wahahaha😂😂 Umm, Just a quick announcement!

So, after I finished this story, I ended up writing a mini-sequel. The real happy ending and my gift for you guys. They were finally happy. They got married, yeyyy!!! Idiots in love, yeyyy!!! And honestly, I thought I should stop there. I really did. But then I saw this lovely little prompt on Twitter, and I thought to myself, "What if I made another sequel?"

What if the story continued right after Ivan's death? Right after he jumped. Right after he died. After his suicide.

Dun. Dun. Dun. Dun.

So this is just a little heads-up, a small piece of information so you know what's coming.

In this plot, Ivan wakes up hospitalized. He thinks for a second that maybe… he survived the jump. But no, he didn't. He actually reincarnated in another dimension, in another lifetime. And then Till arrives… with short hair, like in Karma. He's acting like they're already lovers... *Huh??? Strange.*

And the worst part is..

Now that Ivan's there, in the present—he's finally an Omega. The Omega he always dreamed of being.
And in this lifetime, Till is an Alpha.

So the big question is… how will Ivan survive this? How will he endure living in a world where his dream came true—but not in the way he expected? Using a body he did not own?

But don't chu worry!! lit's going to be a happy ending. I promise. This is *truly* a happy ending.

Ivan will get pampered, finally. But of course, it's not going to be that simple. There will be a lot of trial and error, and Till is going to be much more mature in this story. He's grown. He understands more. And Ivan well, he's now in a body he's not used to, and that's going to take a lot of adjustment and work. It won't be easy for either of them.

But again, don't worry. This is the happy ending they deserve, not just the ending I gave them in the main story, but the one that feels right. The one that Ivan truly deserves, after everything.

Sooo, umm what do you think? Would you read it? Should I do it? It will all depend on you.. *scratches neck*

I'm embarrassed...

I love you all. And I still receive so many lovely comments here in the comment section, it really means a lot. Thank you, truly. I love you guys so much.

Bye byeee(˃̵̨̡̛̛̥̥̱̱̱

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!